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CHRONICLE OF DAWN

Ramón Sender, author of *Dark Wedding*, *Seven Red Sundays*, and *A Man's Place*, has been described by Ernest Hemingway as Spain's finest novelist. He is internationally known for his books on the Spanish Civil War, which have been translated into many languages.

In *Chronicle of Dawn* he has revealed the gentle, beauty-loving side of his nature. It is a story of youth and happiness, giving an unforgettable picture of a land and time lost for ever, for Pepe tells his story as he lies dying in a concentration camp just after Franco's victory.

He had spent a happy childhood in an ancient part of Spain, sheltered by the traditional values of home and family. Pepe felt no breath of the impending storm; he was burdened, not with the torment of social struggle, but with his love for Valentina. He knew hate, but only as a normal son resenting his father's domination. Even his fights were the natural squabbles of growing boys. These and other memories gave him strength to endure defeat.

CHRONICLE OF DAWN

To
EMMA DAVIS

By the same author

DARK WEDDING
A MAN'S PLACE
PRO PATRIA
SEVEN RED SUNDAYS
MR. WITT AMONG THE REBELS
COUNTER-ATTACK IN SPAIN

CHRONICLE *of* DAWN

by

RAMÓN J. SENDER

translated from the Spanish by

W. R. TRASK



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UNLIKELY AS IT MAY SEEM

CHRONICLE OF DAWN was written in the concentration camp at Argelès. The author was a Spanish officer on the General Staff of the 42nd Army Corps. Had I not seen it done, I could not have believed that a style so serene and cold, so 'objective', was possible under those cruel conditions. The real author, José Garcés, was a great friend of mine. I also know Valentina V. and Don Arturo and all Pepe's family, and I knew some of the other characters, like Don Joaquín A., who died a natural death. The accessory figures and part of the setting of the narrative are unknown to me, because my acquaintance with the others was later, in the city. Pepe Garcés entered France among the remnants of the Republican Army. From his normal position as a healthy, intelligent man of thirty-five, a gentleman after the Spanish fashion — which is to say that he made dignity a kind of religion — he found himself changed into a refugee under suspicion, subjected to the rifle-buttocks of Pétain's Senegalese Negroes. Like many others, he was herded along in this fashion to a bleak corner of a countryside open to the February ocean. He was shut up in an immense enclosure surrounded by a wire fence. There we met. He had given the few things he had brought with him — a blanket, a tin cup, a penknife — to the first who had asked for them. He never went to the place where food was distributed and consequently ate only when someone brought him food and managed to persuade him that he had more than enough. The only thing he owned in the world was a book. It was not a historical treatise, or a novel, or a religious book. It was a technical manual of fortification. As long as the central region — Madrid and Valencia — resisted, which is to say during the first four weeks of our life in the concentration camp, he continued to read his book, making sketches, filling

the gaps in his knowledge. 'Ah,' he used to say, 'they are resisting in the Centre, and one day we shall be sent for.' He made a dugout in the earth, like a moderate-sized tomb, close to mine, and there he remained with his book, day and night. This refuge would have sufficed to protect us from the wind if it had not rained so constantly. But after the first rain it was never dry again. And we had to sleep there. At night the wet ground froze.

Pepe Garcés never went out except to go to the entrance of the camp, where the dead were laid (thirty or forty every day). He would come back taciturn. 'We must take as good care of our health as possible,' he would say, 'because we shall be needed.' And he opened his book again.

The day that we knew Madrid and Valencia had surrendered he went down to the seashore and threw his book into the water. He returned to his dugout and tried to sleep. It was hard to believe that he could look any worse than he had, but Pepe Garcés had collapsed. The fluid that sustained his nerves had gone with the manual of fortification and with the hope of returning to the fight. He was a dead man.

'All useless!' he said, pacing back and forth.

He did not know what went on around him. When he heard that someone had left the camp and he was asked if he would like to leave, he shrugged his shoulders:

'What for?'

One day he began talking to me about far-off things. The village, his family, Valentina. Since I knew them, I listened at first. He talked particularly about an old peasant woman who lived in his home until his mother died. They called her 'Aunt Ignacia'. His chief anxiety in those days was whether Aunt Ignacia had died before the beginning of the war or not. The idea that such a pure and simple being had known so much suffering unbalanced him. 'You do not know,' he said, 'the impression she made on me the last time I saw her. I was twenty-eight, a grown man, and I had gone to the village on business connected with the estate. It had been

many years since any of my family had gone there. I stayed with some relatives, and when Aunt Ignacia heard of it she came to see me. Her husband had died many years before, and her face was as wrinkled as a walnut. She embraced me and kissed me and then sat down in a chair and looked at me. She looked at me and cried and said nothing. For two hours. When I left, she was still sitting there crying, with her hands folded in her lap.' My friend repeated: 'Oh, if only she died before the war, if only she died without knowing so much hatred!' My friend had seen her in 1930. She was so frail that perhaps she could not have survived for six more years.

'Do you think that she died during those six years?'

His mania for talking of those days and those people was a defence and a flight. I talked too. I allowed myself to be influenced by what Pepe said, without despairing. My one idea was to get out of the camp. When I wanted to unite my friend's fate to mine in my plans for freedom, he looked at me wonderingly and said:

'Go away from here? What for?'

And he went to the entrance of the camp to look at the day's dead. 'Those men,' he said to me once, 'those men have gone out by the only gate worthy of us.'

I never argued with him. As soon as I was in the camp I had decided to conserve my energy in every possible direction. Physical energy, moral energy, intellectual energy. My friend did exactly the contrary. He walked up and down, grew excited when he talked of anything at all, and, although he was beginning to cough and had fever in the afternoon, he still would eat only a small part of what I brought him. The rest, he shared. He used to look around and say disconsolately: 'Oh, what hungry faces!' But he did not see his own.

I succeeded in leaving the camp and made an effort to secure his release, but I was always stopped by his own refusal. I went to see him and brought him food and

tobacco, which he immediately gave to some peasants from his province, keeping nothing for himself but a package of cigarettes. The second time I went I found him in such a condition that I was surprised to see him up at all.

'No such thing,' he answered my alarm. 'I am better than ever. I've made a hut with your blanket and I am sheltered from wind and rain.'

He asked for writing paper, notebooks, and pencils. And later for candle-ends too. In addition, I brought him an electric flashlight and some calcium tablets. The time we were together he spent talking to me about his mother, Aunt Ignacia, and Valentina, who had been his first and great love. I listened and was as much interested as he was. When I spoke of the possibility of getting him released, he flooded me with further reminiscences of his childhood, of his early youth. I thought of the most absurd procedures, including having him declared insane, to obtain his release. No matter how — once he was out, I would take charge of him and see that he was properly cared for. But he was not insane, he was the most reasonable man in the world, although when he talked he was always fired by a sort of idyllic enthusiasm.

When everything had been arranged for his release, he said:

'It will be useless. I am grateful to you, but you are wasting your time. I shall not leave here except to go to Spain.'

'To Spain?'

'Others have been released from here and been taken to Spain.'

'Who had them released? The Fascist police. And they took them to Spain to shoot them.'

'Obviously.'

'Why obviously?'

'We lost and we must pay. Our war was an undertaking to win or die.'

My efforts were unavailing. All that I was able to do was

to continue bringing him calcium tablets, notebooks (which he used up in surprising quantities), and pencils. It pleased him, and, since he had been taking the calcium, he seemed, if not better, to have paused in the descent to ruin. I tried more and more arguments to convince him, but the two serious attempts I had made through the British and American committees, he himself transferred to other internees, who obtained their liberty by this extraordinary chance. 'They have children,' he said.

'But why aren't you willing to leave? What madness is this?' I cried.

Seeing me so excited, my friend exaggerated his own calm:

'It is useless. I don't want to drag out my life somewhere. If I get out, do you know what I will be? At best, a deceived hero. Everyone deceived us. The fact is that the generation now in power everywhere is a corrupt generation, a generation of liars. Few of us will live until the succeeding generation, our generation, takes command of things. Few will live until then because the war undermined our health. But even if we live, it is not certain that the rising generation is not contaminated. It seems that to reach the level of power, you have to lose everything first.'

Lowering his voice as though he were telling me a great secret, he added:

'They believe in nothing. That is what makes them liars. What is a man without faith to say? You know what they say in our country when they condemn a man. They don't say, "He's a thief" or "a criminal", even though he may be one. Those things are not so important. The serious thing is when they say, "He is a man without substance", or "of no substance". In a man, substance is faith. There lies the whole question.'

'Leave this place, and there will be at least one man of faith in the world.'

'What for? The air I breathe, the ground I walk on, will all be borrowed. And to live by borrowing from men without

faith — I can't believe in that. No, no. Our war was a war for life or death. The vanquished must pay. And you,' he added, 'who were like me, do not deceive yourself.'

'I?'

'Yes. There is a great cataclysm coming. You will pay too. All the nations will enter a war which began among ourselves. Our own problems will be exactly repeated on a world scale. And from the coming tension, the faith of mankind will arise once more, and in the face of danger the best will be reinstated in their own lost substance. But while things are being readjusted again, you others will be dragged down by the cataclysm. The enraged and terrified liars will attack you and destroy you because you are now the weakest among men of faith. But you,' he conceded, 'are under an obligation to save yourself, even among them, among the liars.'

'I?'

'Yes, because you have sons. Do what you can. Bring them through, so that they will be men as we were.'

The discussion was difficult because his arguments were much stronger than mine. I felt them within me each time I thought of his obstinacy. So I changed the subject and began to talk to him again about our childhood. He at once gave himself up to his memories. It was as if, instead of living ahead — refusing to go forward in life — he had begun a retrograde motion. Every new remembrance of people and things he had known filled him with delight. And he revealed something else to me:

'I am writing all this.'

I told him that I should like to read it. It ought to be good, because Pepe had always had a discriminating fondness for poetry.

'It distracts me,' he added, 'but besides . . . besides, it helps me to remain a man of substance.'

He had said it with noble humour under his tramp's beard. I gave him more notebooks and pencils. My friend

was surprised by his own memory. 'I do not remember names or faces or occurrences of the two years before the war, but my childhood and my school days I remember very well, and when I write about that period, names and colours and even poems come back to me.'

'No.'

He took some loose sheets from his pocket. 'This is the poem I dedicated to Valentina, composed to a popular song.' My friend identified another sheet. 'This is the love *romancillo* I wrote in my peacock days — unripe melancholy trying to be mature. And this, this is a sonnet to her. I wrote it yesterday. And this one to the shepherds at home. I wrote it yesterday too.' I asked him to lend them to me until my next visit. The song was graceful. It brought back the sunshine of childhood and made me smile with ineffable delight.

PEPE'S SONG TO VALENTINA

All in my father's garden
There grows a little vine.
Tell no one, no one, no one!
Let it be yours and mine.

'Twas you, 'twas you
I saw beneath the yew!
I knew, I knew
How fair and firm you grew.
For you, for you
Turtledove and turtle true.

All by the garden fishpond
Bend down your face to see
It will be you, it will not be you
And a fish in every tree.

'Twas you, 'twas you
That made the reeds so bold,
I knew, I knew
Because you shook with cold.

Play till time for bed
All in the ring
Of cinnamon-bread.

All in my father's garden
Tall grows the tree
Full of empty nests
Only for me.

Come, girl, and play
Play till time for bed
All in the ring
Of cinnamon-bread.

'Twas you, 'twas you
With the lemon-flower spray,
I knew, I knew
That you would cry all day.

Where are you, Valentina?
'Where would you have her be?
She's gone to gather shells
At the bottom of the sea.'

Dindle and dandle!
Here comes the notary
Bringing his candle.

It produced, perhaps, as much emotion in me as in him. Reading it, the song kindled in the air. To think of such things in the midst of such suffering was a kind of pleasantry of God's. He had given me a *romancillo* too. It belonged to the age which is already adolescent in sexual impatience and melancholy. I did not think that I should publish it, but here it is:

ROMANCE TO VALENTINA

(*When they were both in Boarding School*)

Beloved of my waking,
Beloved of my dreaming,
Here in the peace of the window
There waves a rustic curtain
While from the distant pastures
A pastoral clamour rises,
Behind the flock in motion
Rises a cloud of incense
And in the crystal evening
Sounds all the vale of Vero.
Come to the *solanar*
And there we two will temper
The hours in good *romance*
With the wind for diapason
Because this wind from Sobrarbe
Will set your hair on fire
Will chant his ancient ballad
With the rhyme-words of my kisses
Then if it so befall us
Before the stars bring evening
Will make you even whiter
Will make my thoughts lie quiet.

Although it has a certain country fragrance, the melancholy seems affected. And the 'Will make my thoughts lie quiet' is over-cultured and intellectual. But in the following sonnets there is poetic talent, a talent which he never began to cultivate 'professionally', we might say, if poetry ever becomes a profession. But these qualities in him were mere trifles, beside his prodigious strength of character.

SONNET TO THE SHEPHERDS OF SANCHO GARCÉS

These mountain shepherds, leaving to the care
Of dogs their cabins, put their sandals on
And to the confines of themselves have gone
Thus shod; God's praise in hymns they did declare
Under the auspices of dead kings mourned
They congregated in an oak tree's shade
Their crooks in sceptres flowered; they obeyed
And from God's praises to God's laws they turned.
All through the mountain peaks the tempest rolled
From the horizons dropping hail to fold
In storm Guatizalema's either side
Lightning descended even on the oak
In a golden cross, whereat the new king spoke:
Kneel down, kneel down, for this shall be our sign.

I was not surprised that he could write such serene verses in those surroundings, since I had seen him wake under the frost of dawn disturbed at the idea that Aunt Ignacia should have known the horrors of war. But these things sustained life in him much better than my calcium tablets. Alas, there was no sustaining it longer than the time he needed to transfer the last of his memories to paper!

SONNET TO VALENTINA
(*in his maturity*)

The afternoon in the garden of my sisters
The which a boreal breath kindled to flame,
Diana of broken marble and falconry
Stark naked in an intimacy of frogs.
Pentecosts of the air in the bell-towers
The azure rooster scratching at his comb
Flowers and fruit in the forgotten basket
And a trembling in your two early hands.
You were not you but your conjecture

Barely raised from the waist
Two leaves of henbane in your hair.
I leaned against your blond knee
'Look at me now no more, for such are dreams'
And you closed your eyelids of rain.

My friend continued to write his recollections, interspersing them with poems which I did not know and which, because they were sometimes written on loose sheets instead of in his notebooks, have been lost. After I read the last sonnet I asked him a stupid question:

'Blond knee?'

'Yes.'

'Valentina?'

'Oh, she was very dark, but her knee, her arms, her throat with her first-communion chain around it, were blonde.'

My friend died in the concentration camp at Argelès on November 18th, 1939, aged thirty-six. When he had finished writing his recollections — the things that seemed most interesting to him at that 'midday' of his thirty-five years — there were no calcium tablets that could keep him alive. He died on my blanket, under a rainy sky. Without suffering, failing quietly. When he died, rain was falling. Drops trembled in the beards of war veterans. Perhaps from the rain. Before he died, my friend smiled and said:

'I am leaving by the only door worthy of us.'

His manuscripts were all given to me. In the first notebook I found the following annotation: 'If you use any of this and publish the first narrative, do what you can to send a copy to Valentina V. I know that she is alive, and you can get her address from the R. M.s, who live at 72 Coso, Bajo Zaragoza.'

These are the first three notebooks. I give them as they were, under what seems to me — after hearing my friend speak of the 'midday' of his life — to be the most appropriate title.

HERE BEGINS THE BOOK WHICH IS CALLED CHRONICLE OF DAWN

FOR the first time in my life, men have confined me to a limited space. My feet cannot go where they will nor my hands do what they want to. Yet there is a way to escape from all this. Only, thought is not enough. If I write down my recollections, I feel that I am adding something material and mechanical to recollection and to thought. That is why I have begun to write. I do not know if I shall be able to go on. I believe so.

I shall start with the period of my childhood when my memories begin to be continuous. I shall go on until I have told everything, down to to-day.

I shall make no digressions. That is why I allow myself to make them now, before I begin. Once I have begun I shall only relate facts. Setting down one memory after another, as I might lay one brick after another to build myself a shelter against wind and rain. Perhaps that is what, really, I am setting out to do.

I

When I became ten years old I thought I had entered the period of responsibilities. I began to take less part in street fights, in our gang wars. I had a gang of my own in our town — eight or ten boys who fought under my orders wherever the enemy showed himself. The most bloodthirsty of the enemy gangs was led by Colaso, and his most dangerous henchman was Carrasco, who lived in the house next to mine. However, I had seen nothing of either of them for three months. This change was caused partly by my introduction to regular studies and partly by my parents' making it more and more difficult for me to have a 'private life'. I had to study — and it was no longer a question of primary school,

but of serious professors who lived in the capital, and before whom I should have to present myself to be tested in such arduous subjects as geometry, history, and Latin. All this impressed me considerably. My father regarded it as a matter of great importance. That didn't make me work any harder; it only made me uneasy.

To study, I had to stay at home, and this change in my existence made the details of our family life stand out in clearer relief. My room was at the top of the house, and beside it there were two large storerooms through which I could get out on to the tiled roof of the second story. The doors of these storerooms were kept locked so that we children should not get in, but I went in and out easily, and left them locked behind me. The way I could manage old locks surprises me even yet.

To study my geometry, I used to rise at dawn, let myself into the storerooms, and then climb out on the roof. It was not a very good place to study, and I ran some risk, because the tiles were covered with hoarfrost and sloped steeply. The first time, my boots slipped, I fell, and started sliding. I should have been killed on the flagstones of the inner court if there had not been a chimney in the way directly below the window. After that I learned to slide down to the chimney on two rows of tiles. Once there, I turned round, settled down comfortably in the sun, and opened my books. I read through my lessons, but I paid more attention to the cats and the sparrows. The cats came to know me, and we ended by being good friends. But the sparrows could not get used to me — at least not then.

Naturally, I knew our house cats and could tell them apart from those of the neighbourhood. We had one light-red cat that no one in the family liked. He was the victim of a proverb which, in his case, seemed to me wholly unjust. When anyone wanted to say something disagreeable about a man or woman with light-red hair he would wink one eye and recite, 'Nor dog nor cat that colour!' My family's dislike of

the light-red cat proceeded from this prejudice, and the poor beast bore it stoically. Realizing that I was the only one who liked him, he showered me with attentions. He used to wait for me on the roof-tree — cats always like the highest places they can find. When he heard me opening the window he came picking his way down the tiles, avoiding the places where the hoarfrost lay. I slid down the tiles like a mechanical doll until I bumped into the chimney, and he came up and put his wet paws on my open book, making a mark beside a Latin declension or a triangle, depending upon whether I was studying Latin or geometry, then he strutted back and forth, rubbing his back on my chin and his tail on my nose. The other cats gathered around and looked at my cat admiringly, and I kept watch on their movements. I called to them caressingly and held out my closed hand as if I had something to give them, and when I was sure that they wouldn't make friends I took my catapult out of my pocket and fired little bursts of shot at them — sometimes with good effect. Then they went away, but showed no signs of fright.

From my post on the tiles I could see the tower of the Convent of Santa Clara where it rose above the housetops, narrow and square and covered with Moorish arabesques. Between the tower and my lookout there were many roofs — reddish or black or shades of green — and between them here and there the thin pillars of a *solana*, hung with drying clothes. And every day invariably, as soon as I had greeted the cat, the little bell in the tower began ringing, turning over and over in a sort of sonorous alarm. 'The nuns are leaving their cells to go to chapel,' I would say. And it served as a warning, because the chaplain of the convent was my tutor. He was named Don Joaquín A., and he lived at the foot of the tower. He was fifty years of age, rough and melancholy in appearance. My father said that he had been a priest of note but that because of an accident — he had broken a leg and limped considerably, though it was not an ignoble limp — he had had to renounce his ambitions and

retire to this secondary post. His house contained several rooms, with glass doors opening on to a terrace entirely covered with flowers. The terrace ended in a small balcony which overlooked the little Plaza of Santa Clara; the side toward the entrance-court of the convent was filled by a long balustrade. The pavement, the walls, the pillars of the convent portico, and the stairway were all of brick, to which the years had given a dusty colour. A few straggling weeds grew in the crevices. There was a bell in the court, which rang whenever anyone opened the gate. The convent belonged to a cloistered order, which means that the nuns never went outside it nor did anyone from the outside world ever go in, least of all persons of the opposite sex. In the morning — which was the time I went there — the portico was full of sunlight. In the afternoon, and even more at twilight, I would have had no doubt that ghosts haunted it. The chaplain, with his rough and melancholy manner, was a man to get on well with them.

To reach the convent I didn't really have to go out in the street. At least not by the front door. I went down into the inner court by the open stairway from the kitchen, from the court I went to an empty stable (it was always empty — a wonderful place for us to play in), from there to a poultry-yard full of geese and hens (the roofs of their shelters peopled with pigeons), and from there to an alley paced with narrow uneven flagstones which ran right to the Plaza of Santa Clara. This alleyway — Nun's Alley — was flanked on one side by small houses held together, God knows how, by worm-eaten wooden balconies. In one of these houses lived a woman named — like the Plaza and the convent — Clara. She was the bishop's sister (my father, to lessen the offensive relationship, said she was his 'cousin'). She was some forty-eight years of age and received a monthly pension from her brother which was paid over to her by my mother. The bishop's entire family spent the better part of their lives trying to convince Clara that she ought to enter the convent

but she laughed at them all and answered roguishly, 'Yes, a nun, a nun! The kind that live two in a cell!' She spent her pension on clothes, especially underwear, and she always had a flower in her hair. When she went out it was to buy sweets at the confectioner's and wine at the tavern. Her dresses were ugly, almost in rags, and if one of her neighbours made a remark she pulled up her skirt and proudly showed her starched petticoats covered with lace. When she called at our house to get her pension she never came inside, but we children used to run to the door to see her.

Every day when I passed her house in winter time, she would grumble from her balcony, 'Poor child, with his legs blue with cold! With what they steal from me they could make him long trousers!'

Sometimes in spring, her grudge against the bishop would grow stronger. 'A nun, a nun!' she would say. 'Some day I'll catch my brother under a hedge!' This threat translated itself for me into an amusing scene: the poor old Bishop whom everybody venerated ('a saint', my father used to say) fighting with his sister at a crossroad.

I was quite well advanced in Latin. While this was my first year of geometry it was my third of Latin, for my father was a victim of the cultured delusion that unless you know Latin you can never know Spanish. But there was a difference, because now I was studying for the examinations, which meant that it was in deadly earnest. My tutor was terribly exacting, because what he wanted was that 'when I went up to be examined, I should know more Latin than the professor'. He meant the lay professor at the Institute. He believed that only priests really know Latin.

On this particular day we were studying Seneca's 114th Epistle, where he writes: 'Multi ex alieno saeculo petunt verba: duodecim tabulas loquuntur.' Mosén Joaquín asked me to explain to him why Seneca wrote 'duodecim tabulas' instead of 'sermonem duodecim tabularum.' I didn't know, and although Mosén Joaquín realized that he had asked too

much of me, he was not in a very good humour when we turned to geometry. That proved to be my undoing. As so many times before, the cats were to blame. The open book still showed their damp paw-prints, looking like rough sketches of clover leaves.

At the end of the lesson Mosén Joaquín said: 'I refuse to take the blame for your faults, and if you fail at the end of the course your father must know that the responsibility was yours and not mine.' It was a fact that I had not learned my geometry lessons for several weeks. He had come to realize that I was being obstinate about it, and he wanted to put a stop to it. He looked at me, undecided. Then he shut his eyes as if he were making a great decision, muttered, 'I have it,' and made a cabalistic sign in my little oilcloth-covered notebook. I had to leave the notebook open at my father's place at table every day at dinner time. Ordinarily, I understood the meaning of the marks my tutor put in it, but to-day I could make nothing of it. There was a queer scrawl and a figure 20. I reached home extremely curious. It was noon, but my father was not in. My brothers and sisters, most of them younger than I, were playing up and down the halls. Their nurses and wet nurses were working in the kitchen, along with the famous Aunt Ignacia — who was not our aunt but who, having seen our mother born, was almost as important a person in our household as she. In the dining-room, which opened on to a small inner court, the table stood glittering with glass and silver. The dining-room had a large fireplace, framed in light carved wood; a fire of logs was burning in it. The fireplace was directly behind my father's chair; across from it was a balcony, beyond which you could see the gallery opposite, full of sunlight. The dining-room was dark and solemn. Beside my father's plate stood a glass siphon covered with metal mesh, with an arrangement for inserting a lead capsule of carbonic-acid gas; this manufactured the soda which diluted our wine. Once empty, the lead capsules became mine.

My brothers and sisters began coming in. The little ones tried to put on their bibs themselves — to do so, they hung them over their shoulders, tied the strings under their chins, and, when they were tied, turned the bibs around to the front. Aunt Ignacia ate with the maids in the kitchen, and that day we were astonished to see her eating with an enormous ladle, all the time calling out, to make us laugh, 'My mouth is as small as an angel's, so I eat with a coffee spoon'. The maids had already eaten — they dined before we did — but Aunt Ignacia used to dine at the same time as ourselves or after us. Her husband almost never came to the house. He was a labourer. But one day when Aunt Ignacia was quarrelling with the woman who made our bread they got so angry that the woman, who envied her, told her that she had 'a face like a carnival mask', and Aunt Ignacia answered, 'I may have a face like a carnival mask, but I married the handsomest man in this town.' From that time on, Aunt Ignacia's husband seemed to me a sort of mythical being — 'the handsomest man in this town'. My elder sister, who was three years older than I, told me that he really was.

The peculiar scribble in my notebook had a fatal effect. What happened had never happened before. It was quite true that I was behind in geometry — the course was going on, and I had not mastered even the first ten lessons. My tutor had seen that I was regularly neglecting both geometry and history, and had made up his mind to condemn me to a whipping of twenty strokes. When my father looked at my notebook he ordered me to leave the table and wait for him in my room. He shook his head despairingly. His eyebrows, his nostrils, and his short-clipped moustache were all expressive of energy. 'You are setting out to be a shame and a disgrace to us. But you shall not be, because I am your father and I won't tolerate it.' I was standing beside him, motionless. My little sisters — especially Maruja, who had reasons for bearing me a grudge — kept staring at me with a sickening I'm-better-than-you expression. 'I'll get you,' I

said to myself, humiliated, 'I'll get you, you harpy.' My father hesitated between putting another capsule into the siphon and continuing his scolding. 'Is this the example you give your brothers and sisters? Is this the way you repay your father's trust?' What kind of an example could I give Maruja? I'd give her a good slap, that's what I'd give her! My mother interrupted gently, telling me to go to my room. But my father had not finished. 'Can't you even look ashamed? No — you have no shame. Look at him, how coolly he listens! You're cynical — stupid and cynical. And you'll grow more so every day. But I' — and he raised a threatening hand — 'I'll find a way to stop it. If I don't stop it, God will call me to account, and I'm not going to tell Him that you were the stronger and I couldn't control you. I shall find a way to stop it, no matter what it costs.' The reprimand was more dramatic than ever before. I had made up my mind not to listen, but I did not dare leave the room until I was told to. I thought of indifferent things. Across the thought, for example, of my bird snares in the yard, my father's voice would float, solemn and persistent. 'The shame of the family, a disgrace to every one of us — if you don't pass for the Institute I'll apprentice you to a shoemaker.' Instead of indifferent things, I began to think of the things that moved me most. Of Valentina. I was in love with Valentina, the notary's youngest daughter. My father's words could not penetrate her image. Valentina had deep eyes which were too big for her face, her two short braids were drawn over the top of her head, and at the place where they came together her mother always put a little bunch of artificial flowers, yellow and green and red. And when I spoke to her she stood first on one foot and then on the other and sometimes scratched one leg with the other shoe, though there was nothing for her to scratch. On that image my father foundered. His voice rang false, and the more impressive he tried to be, the more artificial and meaningless he sounded.

As always when my father scolded me, the light-red cat came and jumped up on my shoulder. My father shouted, holding the siphon capsule in his hand; the cat purred, passing from one shoulder to the other by way of my back or my chest and rubbing himself against my chin as he went. Maruja continued making a great show of eating nicely to please father. Concha, amused by the cat, concealed a tolerant smile behind her grown-up's napkin.

My mother got up, came to my side, and took me by the arm. That meant that my father's anger had reached its climax. She led me out and went with me up to my room; she continued to scold me, but in gentle tones. 'Your father isn't well, you mustn't upset him.' Terribly offended by having been made to leave the table and humiliated at the threat of a whipping, I thought: 'Good! He isn't well? Good! If he dies, so much the better! I wish he would die and we were poor and I had to look after mother. Then they'd see who I am!' But when I said so to my mother in measured terms, she became frightened.

'My son,' she said, taking me perfectly seriously, 'at present your role in life is to obey.'

'To obey?'

'Yes indeed. You were born. And having been born and being in this life, there is nothing for it but to obey.'

'Well, if I'd known that, I wouldn't have been born!'

I was engrossed in the thought of the whipping. My father wanted to settle the account before he began his dinner, and I could hear him coming up the stairs. Before he entered, my mother kissed me and went out. I could hear them talking in low tones in the hallway. My mother's kiss incited me to heroic measures. I would lock the door, or go out on the roof where my father couldn't come after me, or defend myself with my air rifle. But my father was already in the room, and in his hand he held a whip. Once again I took refuge in the thought of Valentina; but if her image was stronger than any injury, it had no real efficacy against

physical pain. The idea of being chastised in my naked flesh, with my trousers pulled down, was so humiliating that the thought of Valentina only increased my shame. My father began to whip me with some force. I bore it without moving an eyelash.

At last he asked me, 'Have you anything to say?'

'Yes. It was supposed to be twenty and you've only given me eighteen.'

My father went out and slammed the door behind him, muttering, 'You may be a tramp, but I'll straighten you out!' When I was left alone I began to have a tremendous desire to be a 'tramp'. Really to be one, to justify myself for all this in some way that would utterly disgrace my father and send my mother crying into a corner. These ideas evaporated a little later when I heard everyone getting ready to go out and my mother and Aunt Ignacia appeared, the latter with a tray of dinner to which my mother, by way of an extra dessert, had added some of the sweets that the nuns of Santa Clara occasionally sent her. Mother stole a glance at me, trying to hide her uneasy curiosity. Aunt Ignacia joked, 'Here comes the condemned man's last dinner.'

And she told a story. Aunt Ignacia's stories were in a peculiar vein which was usually not appropriate to the situation. But at the end of them someone would speak some highly expressive phrase which she would repeat, imitating accent and gestures in such a way that there was nothing to do but burst out laughing. This time, the allusion to my situation as a 'condemned man' brought to her mind a story of a hanging. Mother didn't listen to her, and I didn't listen to mother, who was sighing. All my attention was given to Aunt Ignacia.

'And then they put the noose round his neck and fastened the rope to the gallows. And the criminal said to the hangman, "For God's sake, don't pull it so tight, or I'll choke".'

The 'for God's sake', which was forbidden in our house, but which was overlooked when Aunt Ignacia said it because

she was Aunt Ignacia, made me burst out laughing. It was a sort of revenge. Aunt Ignacia, in the depth of her simplicity, understood that. But the story was not finished. The hangman answered the criminal:

‘That’s just what you’re here for, my man.’

I devoured my dinner. The end of the story did not make me laugh as much as the ‘for God’s sake’, pronounced with such a rustic air, had done. Besides, the poor criminal who could not conceive that they meant to kill him caused me pain. Mother watched me eating, and sighed. I asked her if I might go out to play, and she said it would be better if I stayed in the house and that I could play if any of my friends came.

‘What this little boy wants,’ said Aunt Ignacia, ‘is something I know.’

‘What?’ I asked.

‘That’s a secret.’

‘How do you mean?’

Aunt Ignacia screwed up her face like a circus clown’s and, hunching up her shoulders and dropping her hands in her lap, repeated, ‘It’s a secret, a dear little secret.’

I laughed again. My mother went out; she was smiling too. When she was gone, Aunt Ignacia wiped my mouth and said:

‘Valentina is coming.’

Then she said I ought to be ashamed of myself, and told me another story. This one was about a hanging too. Each of Aunt Ignacia’s stories had a title; this one was called ‘Justice in Almudébar, or He Who Owes Not Pays’. It was about a tailor who was going to be hanged for having committed a murder. When he was standing on the scaffold and they asked him if he had anything to say, he turned to the audience and said: ‘Except for my crime, I have always been a good neighbour and on good terms with everyone, and besides I am the only tailor in Almudébar. When I am gone, who will make clothes for you as well as I did? On the

other hand, you have two blacksmiths here, and one is quite enough for the trade in the place.' And the people began to say that he was right, and they caught one of the blacksmiths, who was in the square, and they hanged him and let the tailor go.

Again I couldn't laugh at the end as I had laughed when she raised her voice in imitation of the condemned man's speech. The blacksmith at the end caused me great pain. Aunt Ignacia concluded:

'You must begin to behave better, or else .

'Or else what?'

'Someone will get spanked.'

That offended me. It called back the humiliation of my whipping, those blows which had established between my father and myself the relation of criminal and executioner. And my skin was smarting where I had been struck. Aunt Ignacia gathered up the dinner dishes and went away.

Valentina was coming.

The wardrobe was open, and there hung my clothes. There was my green velveteen suit, which looked like velvet. It was my favourite, a 'hunting' jacket with four pockets and a belt, which came down almost to my knees and left room for barely two inches of trousers to show. In the darkness of the wardrobe it looked black; between the lapels the thin silver chain of my watch shone dimly. Even when I didn't wear the jacket, I went every night to wind the watch and look at the time. I took the jacket down and put it on my bed. The watch was thin, and had a cover that opened by a spring. The cover was engraved with oak leaves and acorns, leaving a little space bare with room for a shield in which were my initials. The numbers on the dial were yellow. My elder sister said they were amber, they had a soft brilliance, it seemed as if there were a light inside them. The trade-mark was composed of three initials, M. Z. A. — Madrid, Zaragoza, Alicante — and someone had convinced me that the trains ran in accordance with my watch. I

was very fond of this suit, but it had a dressed-up look so that when I wore it I was obliged to scrub my knees with soap and water and sometimes with a stiff brush or even with pumice. I made my toilet as well as I could, put on white socks and patent-leather shoes, combed my hair, using plenty of soap to hold down my curls, looked at my watch, and went downstairs.

I have said before that Valentina was a brunette. Her father, the notary, was named Don Arturo V. He was a friend of my father's and had another daughter, two years older than Valentina, named Pilar, a blonde beauty in the standardized American manner. Her pale golden hair and white skin, and a look of passivity which was her habitual expression, made me dislike her intensely. Valentina had big eyes and a little pouting mouth, her face was a perfect oval, the colour of her skin, light olive. They were both pretty, each in her way, but I, who adored Valentina, naturally felt obliged to detest Pilar. They were both studying the piano, and on gala occasions they would play charming sonatas for four hands. Don Arturo was very fat and had the appearance of a patriarch. His wife was much more bourgeois-looking.

I loved Valentina, but until that evening I had not told her so. Fortunately, she arrived before my brothers and sisters had come back from their excursion. I was especially glad that Maruja was not there, because I was afraid that she would make me ridiculous by telling about my whipping. I listened for sounds on the stairs. I knew that Valentina would not come in until someone went downstairs to receive her, because we had a ferocious bulldog chained in the court. He had never shown any signs of disliking Valentina; even so, she was right to be afraid of him. I went downstairs twice in error. The first time I found a beggar sitting in the street by the door, a contented-looking man with rosy cheeks; his thick eyebrows and his beard were beginning to turn white. From under his cloak he produced some empty tin

cans into which he carefully packed scraps of food. In one of the cans I recognized something that I had left on my plate, and experienced a momentary anguish linked with a feeling of security. Yet that beggar, who studied neither Latin nor geometry and whose father had been dead for years, was a fortunate being.

Valentina appeared at last, running down the street; when she saw me at the door she stopped. Then she came walking along, wearing a far-away smile; suddenly she changed her mind and started running again. When she arrived she began blaming her sister Pilar. She said she had wanted to come sooner, but they had made her practise her music. I thought this was a good opportunity to look at my watch and tell Valentina that the figures on its face were amber. Though she perfectly well knew it, she thought it was her part to ask me if it had been a present for my first communion. I told her that it was, and that the chain was silver too. Then we ran in through the door. Every two steps Valentina took two more on one foot, which made the artificial flowers in her hair dance gaily. When we came where the dog was I told her she mustn't be afraid. He was lying sound asleep; I went up to him, sat down on his ribs, opened his mouth, put my clenched fist into it, and said, "These dogs are perfectly gentle."

Valentina looked at my knees, and I thought I had done well to wash them. Upstairs, panting with impatience and fatigue, she told me that her sister went too fast on purpose when they were playing the Bertini sonata so that she couldn't keep up with her and would make a show of herself. I asked her if she wanted me to kill her sister, but Valentina answered solemnly:

'Leave her alone. It's better to let her live and have everybody see what a fool she is.'

Valentina's two little ears showed in front of her braids, which were wound over the top of her head. Her black hair was parted from the nape of her neck, exactly over the clasp

of a gold chain from which hung a medal the size of a centime representing the Virgin of Sancho Garcés Abarca. On the back of the medal were engraved her initials and the date of her first communion. I was going to ask her if it had been a present; but these were questions that we asked each other rather too often, so I stopped. One of the things that troubled Valentina was that her parents called her sister by a pet name: Pili. I said that that very day I would name one of our old cats Pili and the whole family would call her that and when everyone had taken to using the name we would invite Pilar to visit us and I would bring in the cat so that everyone would understand. Valentina giggled.

We were now in the downstairs part of the house, and I kept calling, 'Pili!' For some reason, the cat came, which filled us with delight. Meanwhile, we were making our way to the gallery. As we went, I put my open hand against Valentina's ear and followed its outlines as if I were sketching it with my palm, pressing down and lessening the pressure at the same time.

'That does the same as a sea shell,' I said.

And I added that Pilar's ears would grow every day until they were as big as an elephant's. Valentina remembered that her mother had told her one day that she had very pretty ears, and then felt obliged to explain to me how she washed them and how she always used a thin towel to wipe them because you couldn't do it with a bath towel.

'Who do they like better, Pilar or you?'

Valentina said that no one at home liked her. With a superior air I asked her if her father had ever beaten her. She said no, but that her mother had sometimes boxed her ears. I didn't think that her mother was an enemy worthy of me, so I only made a face and stuck out my tongue. But Valentina added that her mother had never hurt her, and that sometimes it was her own fault because she liked to make her angry. It was clear that she was on the point of asking me the same question, but she stopped, no doubt

because she thought it unnecessary. Then she burst out laughing. She made fun of herself:

‘What a fool I am!’

‘Why?’

‘I was going to ask you if you had ever been beaten.’

Me? Who would beat me? And what for? Just then I had some difficulty in sitting down. At once I said to Valentina, over-eagerly:

‘When Maruja arrives, don’t talk to her.’

‘She always comes and pulls up my dress,’ said Valentina, ‘to see what I have on underneath, and then she tells me what she is going to wear on Sunday.’

I turned pale with anger. Pulling up her dress was something that couldn’t be done, or at least could be done only under a definite risk, that of going to hell or falling asleep for ever in the woodshed among the rats. Sometimes when I was playing with Valentina I saw part of her legs, but I knew very well that you don’t pull up a girl’s skirt. What I saw when my eyes, without my wanting them to, fell on Valentina’s legs was an intimate white garment with little strips of lace, and I received the impression that the parts of her body which I could not see were made not of flesh but of some precious and inanimate material. Since I had owned the watch, I liked to think that they were of amber. Neither could I imagine (if I had ever even thought of it) that Valentina had physical needs like other people. I knew that she sometimes disappeared into the bathroom with one of my sisters, but the bathroom, for children, is the place for secrets and confidences because it is the only place where they are allowed to lock themselves in.

I hated Maruja, but I had not succeeded in transmitting my hate to Valentina. At first this annoyed me. But I soon understood that Valentina was so good that she was incapable of hating anyone. Perhaps, on mature reflection, she did not even hate her sister Pilar. She came and went with the little roses in her hair, smiled when I looked at her, and washed

her ears every morning by a method of her own. But to-day I saw her as a stronger being than usual. I was compelled to it by the idea that I had been whipped. That lowered me so much in my own eyes that Valentina grew and grew. Besides, I was sure that Maruja would tell her as soon as she arrived. Maruja, with her barely eight years, had the gift of perfidy. I had come to fear her bickering weakness.

But I had been whipped. The afternoon was passing, and my brothers and sisters would be coming back. The first thing they would do would be to ask me, 'Have you had dinner?' That would certainly make Valentina wonder. Then, perhaps, 'Aren't you allowed to go out and play?' That was less revealing, but Maruja would seize any opportunity to show me up. In spite of my romantic clothes, I felt weak and dispirited. No one could feel anything about the blows I had received but an ugly, animal pity. It was clear that a father might strike his son, but I was a free entity in the world and no father on earth had a right to lay hands on me. Moving closer to Valentina, I said:

'They say I am your sweetheart.'

'Do you want to be?' she asked.

'I do, yes. How about you?'

'That doesn't matter. If you want to be, we are. What do we have to do?'

'Don't talk to my brothers and sisters. Go right back home now.'

'The maid is coming for me at six,' she said, not understanding.

'I will take you home. I don't want you to be with my sisters, because all they do is talk nonsense. I'll take you home.'

I stood up and took her hand.

'If I am your sweetheart,' she said very seriously, 'I have to do whatever you tell me. If you tell me to come, I'll come. If you tell me to kiss you, I'll kiss you.'

'No, no, not that,' I said, blushing terribly; but realizing

that I was being stupid, I kissed her on the cheek. Then I took her hand and we started toward the street.

'Now we'll go to your house.'

She was my sweetheart and had to obey me, but she wanted to say something to me and did not say it. She liked being in my house, with me, and the fact that I was sending her back to her own, where Pilar ruled, was inexplicable. When we were in the street, hand in hand and side by side, we felt contented again. We had not gone far before we encountered Enriqueta, the mayor's daughter. She was twelve years old, and I had hated her since the year before. Enriqueta was a little harpy. With all the knowledge she had acquired from nursemaids, she led on small boys of her own age, which aroused my hatred. I had listened to the confidences of older boys, who presented things in an ugly and dirty light; but these confidences, in which I did not in the least believe, remained completely apart from my understanding of love. Seeing Enriqueta at that moment, I pretended to be preoccupied, but she looked at us with ironic disdain. I wanted to say something definite against Enriqueta to my sweetheart, but it seemed as though anything I might say would offend Valentina more than it would hurt Enriqueta.

'If you see Enriqueta again,' I said, 'don't look at her.'

Valentina did not understand.

'How can I do that? If I see her, it's because I've looked at her.'

But she gave the answer herself. 'I see her from far away and know it's she. And when she passes me I turn my face away slowly, like this, and look at the wall.'

She did it so thoroughly that she stumbled and almost fell. When she stumbled, the flowers in her hair slipped down to one side. I wanted to rearrange them; she said that it would be better if we had a mirror, and we resigned ourselves to her wearing them in disarray and walked on. In the opposite direction came a pale, round woman, with almost no eye-

brows and goggle-eyes. She stopped, arranged Valentina's flowers, and called her 'my love'. I watched her, not too pleased. Her hands seemed made of sugar candy.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' she said, smiling. 'Jealous?'

We went on, and I was aware she had stopped and was watching us, murmuring endearments. I kept turning my eyes toward Valentina, who answered my happiness by looking in turn at me like someone who is waking from a dream and smiling. The little gold chain against the dark skin of her neck seemed as if it would be hot if I touched it.

'Do you like Enriqueta?' she asked.

'No.'

'She's pretty, though. I wish I were like her.'

'There's no one prettier than you.'

'I wish I were, though. Especially how that I am your sweetheart.'

I put my arm around her waist and felt her shoulder against my chest. She turned and looked at me with quick smiles. I should have liked us to evaporate into that afternoon light which was amber like the figures on my watch and Valentina's legs. Valentina talked about herself. She wanted to tell me what she liked to eat, and she added that when she had gone to bed her mother came to tuck her up tight and she pretended to be asleep so that her mother would kiss her, and her mother kissed her. Hearing this, I couldn't do anything but kiss her hair. And Valentina went on talking. What she liked best was, when she got home after running and jumping and sweating all afternoon, to take off her shoes and put her bare feet into an old pair of slippers she had. Remembering the pleasure of it, Valentina closed her eyes. 'I must try it,' I said to myself.

But heaven sent catastrophe upon us. Round a curve in the street came our old carriage, an unwieldy contraption from my grandparents' time, full of children. My father was on the box.

I wanted to get Valentina out of the way, but there was no side street near. Besides, my father had seen me. And when the carriage stopped beside us, Maruja put out her arm and, pointing her finger at me, shouted:

‘He has on his new suit and his watch!’

My father said, ‘Where are you going?’

‘I am taking Valentina home.’

After a silence full of menace, my father gave his orders: ‘You go home. And when you know your lessons for tomorrow, if you want to go out, come and ask my permission.’

I felt so humiliated that I did not know what to answer.

My father said to Valentina, ‘Get in, child’.

Maruja’s impatience and her broken exclamations showed that she had much to tell Valentina.

‘I’m on my way home,’ Valentina said, remembering her duty as my sweetheart.

But things were to be as bad as possible.

‘Get in. We’ll drive you home.’

There was nothing else to do. She got in. I watched the carriage turn round. In vain I hoped that an axle would break, that the horse, which was very old, would die suddenly. But the carriage was lost once more round the turn in the road, and I made my way home bathed in a cold sweat. I climbed the stairs like a ghost and shut myself in my room. I took off my hunting jacket with a feeling of utter ruin and flung myself on the bed. I did not cry, but I bit the counterpane until I tore holes in it. My breath struck the bedclothes and came back in my face like fire. I looked up. On the wall was an old painting of the child Jesus, who looked like Maruja. I knew that behind the picture there was a sort of niche in which were old papers, inscriptions on parchment, a portfolio of untanned leather, two antique pistols, and a dagger which had doubtless been made from a file because between the two cutting edges the steel was still roughened. The day I discovered these things was an unforgettable one. I kept my secret, and, though I was not

sure that I could use them, the fact of having such arms gave me great strength. I took the dagger and put it in my belt. Then I got off the bed. I didn't know what to do or where to go. I imagined Valentina listening to Maruja's confidences. 'Maruja will tell her that I have been whipped, that I got twenty strokes, and she will imagine me naked, receiving the strokes and crying ignobly.'

I went into the storeroom. In a corner there were eight or ten mattresses folded double and leaning against the wall. I, who had been caressing the handle of the dagger in my belt, threw myself on the mattresses and began to thrust at them furiously. To feel the blade of the dagger go in, to push it deeper and deeper, to strike again, gave me a pure feeling of revenge. I kept this up for several minutes. The wool bulged through the wounds, and a few flocks came out entangled in the guards of the dagger. My teeth were clenched; my fingers hurt from pressing so hard on the hilt. I thought of nothing.

But at last I thought of my father and I had to begin over again with even greater fury. Not a single mattress was left without seven or eight serious wounds. I put the dagger back in my belt and looked around, panting for breath. There in a corner was Aunt Ignacia, with a bag of camphor, beside a pile of blankets. She was staring at me, motionless. 'God in heaven!' she said. 'He takes after his great-grandfather on his mother's side who staked his wife at cards!'

I climbed head first out of the window on to the roof and scrambled down to the chimney on all fours. There was a soft sky with little pink fluted clouds. I went back in again and returned to my room. On my way through the store-room I saw Aunt Ignacia examining the rents in the mattresses, and I said:

'No accusations, now, mind!'

'Holy Virgin, he's after me with a knife! Me, who have changed his diapers a thousand times!'

I hadn't threatened her with a knife at all, but she must

have seen the dagger in my belt and connected it with the threat in my voice. It all seemed very strange to me. I went into my room and reviewed my arsenal. My air rifle, my pocket flashlight, two tops, a box of coloured pencils. Bah, all that interested me there was the rifle and the flashlight. And I thought of Valentina and Maruja. Probably that fool Maruja, who never listened to anything and who when one of the others talked too much began to whimper and said, 'Be quiet, I'm going to talk now' — probably the little fool was talking more than ever, for Valentina was not much of a talker out of deference to her sisters-in-law. I began to think up an adequate revenge, but each one that I considered had a reverse side which would put her in a good light. If I killed Maruja she would have a funeral like one I had seen. A white coffin stuck full of little crystals, with eight wide ribbons hanging from it. Gentlemen in black clothes bowing one after the other. And all the bells in town tolling. No. That was too much. Besides, she might go to heaven. After long hesitation I decided to shut her up in the carriage-house with a goose. A ferocious goose that she was more afraid of than anything in the world. She would scream like a crane. Looking through my arsenal again, I found four small fire-crackers and put them in my pocket. Then I went down to the poultry yard. On my way I passed another locked room which my father pompously called the library; it was littered with magazines and unopened newspapers still in their wrappings and a set of bound volumes of *The Family Museum*. *The Family Museum* was a large-sized, mid-nineteenth-century magazine full of engravings. There were also a few dozen books. We were not allowed to go there, but I had a duplicate key to it hidden in the niche behind the painting.

In the poultry yard the savage goose came at me with head down and wings half open. He did this to anyone he saw, but when he got close enough to recognize who it was he made up his mind one way or the other and either attacked or slunk shamefacedly away. When he recognized

me he raised his head, shut his wings, and went off, dissembling. I saw that he was in form, and went on to the pigeon-house. In the morning, when the sun rose, the pigeons made a sound like a hurricane with their wings. I took a handful of corn from a sack in the carriage-house, and when they saw me they perched on my shoulders, on my head, on my hands, and when the corn was finished and I went to get more the whole flock followed me. There I stayed all the rest of the afternoon until the carriage came back. Then I went to my room again, but, looking into the dining-room, I saw Maruja warming her feet at the fire. 'It's no use,' I said to myself. 'If I ask her she won't answer and if I threaten her she'll scream for mother.' In an agony of uncertainty I went out on the roof and threw my fire-crackers into the chimney one by one. But I made a mistake; it was the kitchen chimney into which I was throwing them — I realized it when I heard the explosions from below and the uproar among the servants. To this day they have not been able to account for it, though Aunt Ignacia, when the cook talked of the devil, shook her head and said: 'Yes, yes. A devil who's the image of his mother's grandfather!'

My father was striding up and down with the wrapped and folded newspaper in his hand, complaining, 'In this house no one ever reads anything.' But he ended by going up to the library, leaving the newspaper in a pile with all the others, and looking into a zinc chest to see if his pipe tobacco, which he used to mix with rum or brandy, was dry. I had been there before him and had taken a volume of Bécquer's poems to my room. I read in it here and there but could not find anything suitable for Valentina. Besides, I was too upset to apply myself to anything. What had Maruja told Valentina? I put down the book and, taking advantage of my father's remaining in the library, went to find my sister. As soon as she saw me she began screaming, 'Mamma!'

'Be quiet! I'm not hurting you. What did you tell Valentina?'

I knew that my other sisters would not have told her anything. Maruja raised her head.

'The truth — I told her the truth. That you're a big stuck-up!'

I moved toward her, threatening and furious.

'And what else?'

'Mamma!'

Mother appeared, and once again I went to my room. For some reason I felt much calmer. Perhaps Maruja had told her everything, but talking to the little idiot had had a quieting effect on me. In my room I began to look at Bécquer's poems again. Now every poem seemed fit for Valentina.

Again the dusky swallows will return
To hang their nests beneath my balcony.

Or that other:

For a kiss — I know not what
For a kiss I'd give.

And I thought: 'My sweetheart loves me more than Bécquer's sweetheart loved him, because Valentina lets me kiss her and even said she would kiss me if I told her to.' I started to copy a short poem which spoke of 'the sound of kisses and the beating of wings', and of which the last line said, 'It is love, passing by'. And after that another, which ended: 'To-day I saw her, to-day I saw her and she looked at me — to-day I believe in God.' But when I had copied them to the end, I threw them into my desk, took out my notebook of Latin declensions, and wrote on it in large letters:

THE UNIVERSIAD

From my tutor's allusions to Greek and Latin literature I knew that there were poems of this kind with similar titles, in which someone's praises were sung. I wanted to begin and write the whole history of the world to show that every-

thing had been created to the end that Valentina and I should love each other. But no ideas came, and, feeling cross, I began a nursery rhyme:

The little pretty sparrow
Sat in the lemon-tree.
With her beak she pecked the flowers,
With her beak she pecked the leaves.

I closed the book and began to walk up and down, trying to find verses for the 'Universiad'. Suddenly the door opened and my father entered.

'So this is how you study!'

He walked over to my pile of books. The first thing he saw was the notebook on which I had written 'The Universiad'. Next, my copies of Bécquer's poems. As I had hidden the book, perhaps he thought that the poems were mine, and he looked at me as though I had sprouted horns.

'Oh!' he said. 'It seems we're not to be spared even this!'

He went away with the poems and the notebook, sighing; this time he did not slam the door. A little later my elder sister sneaked in, and I eagerly asked her what had happened about Valentina. My elder sister admired me because I lived on the top floor and didn't feel afraid. She imagined me studying there at night and could not understand my courage. She was studying history, too, and she always did it in the dining-room; but even so, if there was no one else in that part of the house and her history book suddenly told of the death of some king, she shut her book with a bang and went running through the house until she found someone.

'What's up?' I asked her.

'Nothing,' she said, a little ashamed. 'Only Charles the Fifth died.'

Even though she was growing up she did not lose these fears. Now she stood before me, and I pressed her with questions. She was surprised at my anxiety and assured me that Maruja had not spoken two words to Valentina; she had

put all her energy into monopolizing my father in order to make it clear beyond doubt that the gentleman driving the carriage and talking fondly to her was *her* father, not Valentina's. Father, into the bargain, had patted Valentina's cheek, which had decided Maruja not to speak a word to her through the whole drive.

I showed my gratitude for this news by deciding to begin studying at once. My father had gone away, taking the poems, in the depths of despair. 'Oh!' he sighed. 'A poet! What trials God sends!' When my mother convinced him that they were only copies he said that he felt much relieved and came upstairs to my room again. My sister Concha was no longer there, and I had gone out on the roof with my flashlight. I sat down against the chimney, opened a small textbook of astronomical geography, and began reading and looking at the sky. 'The Three Marys, the Great Bear, Capricornus, the Little Bear. The Pole Star. And some of the planets. Not all of them. The ones that aren't there must be on the side of the earth where it is day.' This part of geography was elective, not compulsory. When I learned that, I took a great liking to it. It was the only thing in my studies that interested me.

My father did not find me in my room. He searched the house for me in vain. Finally I was discovered on the roof. 'For astronomy, it's good to be able to look at the sky,' I said.

'But that part of the course is not compulsory, according to what your tutor says.'

I could not tell him that that was why I was so much interested in it. My father went away and I heard him saying:

'Something has got to be decided on.'

The following day I knew my lessons well. In view of that, my tutor took me into the next room and handed me some pieces of rough stone which showed the impressed outlines of fishbones.

'These are fossils,' he said.

That showed that he had made an excursion the afternoon before. He went on explaining them to me, but, realizing that I was not old enough to be curious about such things, he stopped and said:

'I should like to begin teaching you natural history.'

While he talked he watched me covertly, trying to make out if my punishment the day before had made much of an impression. Mosén Joaquín was my friend and never babied me — that is to say, he treated me as a peer. He took his role with a seriousness which I have never seen equalled. When I found out from certain indications that it was a point of pride with Mosén Joaquín for me to get good marks on my examinations, I understood that he had a need for me and I adopted an almost protective attitude toward him. This was the secret reason why, from then on, I knew my lessons more or less thoroughly, and never went to class without at least having read them over.

II

WHEN my relations with my father improved, the whole family seemed to feel greatly relieved. Mother, my brothers and sisters, Aunt Ignacia. My brothers and sisters chattered incessantly at meals, but if I began to speak they kept still. The only person who seemed to be offended by my new situation was Maruja, who could not bear to have my father speak to me with a smile.

Valentina came often. I could not go to her house as frequently, because, though her mother liked me, her father had a great antipathy for me. He knew that I had said something against him at home and that everyone had laughed. I could not forgive Don Arturo for being Valentina's father. He had a clerk in his office who always wore black, an intelli-

gent-looking man, silent and courteous, rather over-precise in his dress and his speech, but who — poor fellow — was lame and used a crutch. The clerk respected my father greatly; he liked me and began to treat me as a grown-up. I caused great mortification to Don Arturo, who had published a book entitled *Love, an Essay Toward a Psychological Analysis*. It was his doctor's thesis, and he had sent two copies of it to my father, one of them inscribed: 'To Don J. G., this book of stale ideas, with greetings from the author.' My father said it was a very good book, but when my mother asked him if he had read it he answered vaguely and only reiterated that it was a very good book. One day I was in the further yard where Aunt Ignacia sometimes amused herself with the rabbits and goats; I was trying in vain to understand some of Don Arturo's ideas, opening the book here and there. In a moment of inattention the goats tore it to pieces and ate it. Fortunately, it was not the inscribed copy. Some days later when my father said at dinner that it was a remarkably good book I agreed with him and my mother looked at me, wondering. Maruja was all ready to be delighted at what appeared to be a forthcoming reprimand, when I said, perfectly seriously, 'At least for goats.' I explained what had happened, and my father hesitated between laughter and indignation. I told Valentina about it, she told her mother, and the story reached Don Arturo. They tried to make a joke of it, but Don Arturo did not forgive me.

I continued to be in love with Valentina. I returned to copying Bécquer's poems and gave them to her one by one. There were no love poets in her house, but sometimes on the backs of calendar leaves she would find sayings of famous men; or short poems by well-known or anonymous poets, often very erotic:

Between your arms, soft chains,
Love sings his lethal hymn.

Whenever Valentina found the word 'love' she carefully

copied the poem and put it in the pocket of her dress to give to me. One day the poem was by a modern poet; it said, more or less: 'When I met you I loved you and felt a thorn in my heart. The pain from the thorn would neither let me live nor kill me. One day I pulled out the thorn. But now, alas! I feel my heart no longer. Would that I could feel it again, even though pierced by a thorn!' Naturally, I was much moved, and I returned to Bécquer's book. So the weeks went by.

My father had forbidden me to go on to the roof; but seeing that I did not study except when I was sitting by the chimney, he decided to give me permission to do so or at least to pretend that he didn't notice. So now I went out there with a pair of field glasses which I took from the library and with which I could see the roof of Valentina's house. When I told Valentina about it, she decided to go out on to her roof at the same time as I. From then on I saw her from my perch, and a few days later she told me that she had found her father's field glasses and could see me with them. So I decided to make a signal code by which I could talk to her on the days when, for some reason, we could not be together. On a piece of cardboard I sketched every possible pose of arms and legs until I had got an alphabet. There were a few additional poses which were intended to represent whole sentences. Both arms raised with hands open and wiggling fingers meant, 'I dreamed of you'. Arms crossed and legs apart meant, 'Pilar is a fool'. I knew that this pose would be frequently repeated. One arm akimbo and the other raised straight up meant, 'I shall come to your house'. I made an exact copy of it for myself and added one pose which she was not to use and which meant, 'For God's sake'. I thought it indispensable to my masculine role.

Our first dialogue brought me to class an hour and a half late. Mosén Joaquín warned me that this must not happen again. When the sun rose the next morning Valentina and I were on our roofs. She gave me sensational news: her cousin

had arrived. I answered with the sign for 'for God's sake', and became very eloquent, while the cats pricked up their ears, watching me without knowing whether to run, and the pigeons sailed round in small circles with the sun making rainbows on their wings. I had to see Valentina's cousin at once to find out what he was like and how long he was to stay. He was the same age as I was and lived in a nearby town.

My lessons were catastrophic and I arrived late again, though not as late as the day before. The months were passing; spring was drawing near, and with it the examinations. Perhaps Aunt Ignacia had seen my dances on the roof; she had said nothing to me, but I saw horror reflected in her eyes and in the evasive way she answered when I spoke to her. My tutor realized that something extraordinary was happening to me, and he said that he wished neither to tell lies to nor to do me harm. So he refrained from putting any mark in my notebook. I left it on the dining table as usual, and my father mistakenly concluded that my standing was the same as that which Mosén Joaquin had benevolently given me the day before. Feeling grateful to him, I studied a little and then ran off to see Valentina's cousin. To make an impression on him, I put one of the pistols into my belt. Valentina was waiting for me outside her house. She called her cousin; I saw a boy in knickerbockers and a knitted jersey. He wore very thick glasses and was a little taller than I. In the shadow his white skin looked blue. His hair was neatly brushed. We stood looking at each other from a distance without saying a word. Valentina pointed to him and said:

'This is my cousin.'

We continued to look at each other in silence; finally he pointed at me with his chin and blurted out:

'He wants to fight.'

Valentina assured him that I did not. The boy kept on looking at me resentfully. I asked him what his name was.

'Julián Azcona.'

‘Related to the Deputy?’

Valentina answered for him, saying yes. His father was a liberal Deputy whom my father criticized unmercifully. Using words that I had heard at home, I said to him:

‘You are the son of a nefarious politician.’

‘I?’ he said, not knowing what to think.

I started toward him. Moving backward, he repeated:

‘He wants to fight.’

‘Admit that you are the son of a nefarious politician.’

He took another step backward and made the admission. He did not really know what ‘nefarious’ meant. Valentina pacified him:

‘He came so that we could all three play together.’

At one side of the house there was a little hill. Before we set out for it Valentina’s cousin said that he was going to get his gun, and returned with a target rifle which was the dream of my childhood. Not letting me touch it, he said:

‘This rifle loads with real gunpowder and shoots real bullets. Yours is just an air rifle — Valentina told me so.’

I told him that the one she had described to him was not mine but belonged to one of my younger brothers, and with well-simulated indifference I pulled the pistol out of my belt. Valentina’s cousin hid his surprise.

‘If I load this with powder I can kill a horse.’

The boy looked at Valentina, who affirmed with great gravity:

‘Or an elephant.’

‘And I can knock down a house if it isn’t a big one.’

Valentina continued to support me:

‘Like ours.’

Looking hard at his rifle, I added:

‘And I can make an army retreat. Or at least,’ I conceded, ‘I can hold it back until reinforcements arrive.’

The boy shook his head, clicking his tongue.

‘No. I don’t believe that.’

‘Why not? I stand on a narrow bridge where they can only

come over one by one. *You* tell me what would happen then.'

The boy looked at Valentina, who nodded her head gravely.

'And the bridge — where is it? Because there isn't always a bridge.'

We were walking along but we stopped. Valentina's cousin was the first to speak. Pointing to Valentina with some satisfaction, he said:

'She's my cousin.'

Hardly letting him finish, I answered:

'And my sweetheart. A sweetheart is more than a cousin.'

Once again the boy looked at her, and once again she said yes. Then he smiled beatifically and said, 'How silly!'

'What's silly?'

'To be sweethearts.'

'And what business is it of yours?'

Valentina's cousin started moving backward again, saying, 'I knew he wanted to fight.'

Valentina took my hand. Nevertheless, his rifle gave him a certain prestige.

'What does it shoot?' I asked him.

'Cartridges.'

I burst out laughing.

'He says cartridges.'

'All right, bullets,' he said, confused.

I laughed again, exaggerating the joke, and repeated, 'He says bullets!' Then, turning to him again, and coming so close that my breath fogged his glasses, I added:

'What I meant was, what calibre is it?'

He blushed.

'Perhaps he doesn't even know what calibre means,' I said to Valentina. However, we started off together again. The boy seemed as confused and as incapable of any reaction as I had supposed. When we had walked a long way he started to talk about the rifle once more. It was obvious that he was clinging to his weapon as his last shred of dignity.

'Whether you like it or not, this rifle shoots with powder and bullets, and if it hits an elephant in the heart it will kill him too.'

As Valentina had never seen me with a rifle of such powers, I could not bear that.

'That rifle isn't even good enough to play dolls with.'

'What do you mean, not good enough? This is the kind of a rifle they shoot in championships with and win them. And if you fire it at a man it goes right into his body and he dies.'

Once again I burst out laughing, and Valentina seconded me, though it could be seen that she did not quite understand what I was laughing about.

'Is it loaded?' I asked him.

'Yes.'

'Let me see your bullets.'

He took one out of his pocket and showed it to me in his hand.

'That isn't a bullet,' I said. 'That's called "target shot."''

'They shot a dog with this rifle,' he argued, 'a mad dog. And he was a big dog too.'

'I don't believe it. It wouldn't kill a mosquito.'

I put my hand on his rifle, but he clutched it, ready to resist furiously.

'Don't cry,' I said, 'I'm not going to take it away from you. I only want you to see what I think of your rifle.'

I put my left thumb across the end of the barrel.

'Go ahead, shoot.'

The boy's eyes grew wide, and he looked from Valentina to me, uncomprehending.

'I won't shoot, because if I did I'd blow your thumb off.'

I put my right hand quietly on the lock and pressed the trigger. The report rang out; I felt my hand being violently pushed back, and held it out open to the boy. There was not the least sign of a wound. Valentina stood with her clenched hand to her mouth, trying to bite her first finger. The boy looked at my hand, uncomprehending. Unexpectedly the

skin of the fleshy part of my thumb broke open in a jagged star and began to bleed, heavy drops sliding down and falling to the ground one by one. I rubbed my thumb against my first finger and smiled.

'You see? A mosquito bite! Am I dead, Valentina? Did he blow my hand off, Valentina?'

I measured the owner of the rifle with a glance; he was terrified and wanted to go back to the house.

'I didn't do it — you saw I didn't!' he said to Valentina.

The shot must have lodged against the bone of my thumb, because there was no hole by which it had come out. I began to feel a dull pain, which was not localized in the wound but went all through my hand. But Valentina's small dark face, hesitating between laughter and tears, made me forget it completely.

As we went toward the house I thought, 'Now that this has happened, I don't care if Valentina learns about the whipping.' I kept my thumb bent toward the palm of my hand and my fingers closed over it to protect it. Now and again I felt a drop of blood run down my fingers, becoming more perceptible as it grew colder. Valentina's cousin had not opened his mouth again. When we arrived at the house he said that he had something to attend to and went off, but not before I had warned him that if he told anyone what had happened I would accuse him of having wounded me with his rifle and get him locked up in prison. He swore to keep the secret, and, after admitting once again that he was the son of a nefarious politician, he disappeared through the carriage-house door.

'Do cousins kiss each other?' I asked.

'Only when they arrive and when they go away.'

The idea that he was to spend two days in Valentina's house troubled me. Valentina recalled the scene we had played and made fun of him merrily. But she did not know whether she should laugh or cry. Suddenly she asked me, 'Does your hand hurt?'

I showed it to her, smeared with blood from wrist to finger tips. Valentina was horrified, but seeing me smile she smiled too. She said nervously:

'You'll come into the house now, won't you, and we'll wash it?'

I said no, so offended that she did not dare to insist. With my wounded hand I grasped my pistol by the barrel, put it into the other hand, cocked it, and aimed at Valentina's house.

'If it were loaded I'd blow up your house right now.'

Valentina felt that she was in the presence of a real danger, but I quieted her. She pretended to be brave.

'What I'm afraid of is the noise. Give me time to stop up my ears and I won't care.'

When we reached my house we went to the bathroom. Aunt Ignacia saw to it that a boy and a girl never went into the bathroom together, but this time she said nothing. Valentina found some cotton and began to wash my hand. I said that we had a bottle of eau de Cologne and that would be better. Valentina did not hesitate over applying the cotton to the wound itself, and I felt a sudden burning pain. I bit my lip, but my forehead was covered with sweat and the end of my thumb burned like a torch. Valentina finished washing my hand.

'Does it hurt much?'

'Yes,' I said, gritting my teeth. 'But it doesn't matter because it is for you.'

Valentina did not understand, and I was not sure that I knew what I meant any better than she did, but in a confused way I felt that it was all for her sake. Valentina had no doubt that what I said was so, but she listened to me and looked at me as if she had entered a world she did not know.

'I've finished.'

I stood up (I had been sitting on the edge of the bath) and warned her, 'Don't tell anyone.' Valentina understood that the consequences of mischief, even when they were

bloody, had to be kept secret to avoid trouble. She did not know what to do. She put her crossed hands in her shoulders, stood first on one foot and then on the other, and kept looking into my eyes as if she wanted to say a great many things and did not know where to begin.

‘Are you suffering for me?’ she said at last.

And, remembering a religious phrase, I told her that suffering makes us worthy of bliss and many other things. Valentina listened in ecstasy. Neither of us mentioned her cousin again. The pain of my wound, I felt the shot against the bone now that it was growing colder, lifted us to another plane. I took out my handkerchief, very dirty and bedraggled. She looked for hers, which was cleaner, and wound it round my thumb. I held it steady myself in my half-opened hand. She asked me if it was better.

‘Yes, much,’ I said gravely, and added, ‘Besides, I can still use my right hand and that’s the important one.’ I held it up for her to see that it was not hurt. I took out my pistol with it, put it in my left hand, and explained how if the enemy came from the right I could aim this way, or another way if he came from the left, and demonstrated that the wound in my other hand had not put me out of commission at all. Then I gave her two kisses, and we went out.

No one noticed my hand, which I kept in a natural position with the thumb discreetly hidden. Valentina did not leave me for an instant; her idea was to fetch anything that I wanted, to let her little hands supply the lack of my useless one. Maruja watched us in great surprise, realizing that there was something new between us. My elder sister Concha came, as she always did, to offer me protection:

‘Papa is in a very bad humour. He has asked several times where you were. You had better go up and start studying.’

‘In a bad humour, is he?’ and, shrugging my shoulders, I said, ‘Bah!’

My sister shook her head sorrowfully and left us. In another storeroom on the first floor, the house was full of

storerooms, they were starting to play theatre with dolls and our little cardboard stage. We went there, but Valentina and I preferred another kind of theatre in which we were actors and audience. We made up improvised plays; and that day the protagonist was an armchair, but the armchair was I. I sat on a stool with my knees bent at a right angle and my arms stretched out, and they put a sheet over me and covered me all over with it. My head and shoulders were the back of the chair, my extended arms were the armrests, and my thighs and knees the seat. So I remained, in perfect silence. And they hunted a criminal who had committed numerous crimes. When the criminal thought he was safest he came and sat down quietly in the chair, and I began closing my arms slowly but implacably until I caught him around the waist. The criminal had fallen into the trap, and all his cries were in vain. When he realized that his attempts to escape were useless, the questioning began. The next was to be Valentina. It pleased me that Valentina would come to sit on my knees and that I should embrace her.

It took a long time to find her because she had had the clever idea of hiding under the sheet, right beside me. She had come there only to ask me if I was in pain and to look at my bandage. I kept her by telling her that no one would find her there, and she crouched down under my knees. She had to give a little squeak, to guide her pursuers, each time they asked her where she was. At last she was caught, and we all solemnly agreed that no one could hide there again because then the victim would learn the secret of the chair and if he knew what would happen he wouldn't sit down in it. It was a long and earnest discussion. But the maid who usually came for Valentina appeared at the door. We all wanted to begin over again, but the maid was in a hurry. She was a large, coarse woman, with hair on her upper lip and a calm expression.

'I can't wait, because it is late already,' she said.

Then she added, 'And to-morrow is Sunday.'

‘What has that to do with it?’

‘I have to get up early to go and see my betrothed.’

She went every Sunday to see her ‘betrothed’ — as she called her fiancé, who lived in another town ten miles away — and she had to rise early. Each Saturday she told it all over to anyone who would listen.

‘Joaquina,’ I asked her, ‘what is your “betrothed’s” name?’

‘It’s a bad name — they call him The Lizard,’ she said seriously.

I went as far as the street with Valentina. Joaquina, the maid, looked at me with an ineffable expression and said, ‘So polite! He’s a perfect little gentleman.’ The lamp was burning on the wall of the court, throwing two cones of shadow on the pavement. Our dog was asleep at the foot of the stairs. He raised his head with a rattle of his chain and began to growl because at night he was much fiercer, but when he recognized me he stopped growling and wagged his tail. I went to him:

‘León, give me your paw.’

He did not give it to me. I sat down on his ribs and León did not give me his paw, intent on some new smell on my body. Probably the blood on my hand. He sniffed and sniffed, worried and alert, with one ear half cocked. At last he reached my hand and licked it. He realized that I was wounded.

He went on licking the back of my hand with his long tongue. Valentina found the courage to touch the end of his tail from a distance.

‘He is very brave,’ she said to the maid, referring to me.

‘It’s because the dog knows him, because he’s its master,’ said Joaquina.

When we parted at the door I whispered in Valentina’s ear that if she ate nine olives before she went to bed and drank a glass of water she would dream of me. I would do it too, and dream of her.

That night I did not have to study, but the next day,

having dreamed of Valentina (I did not remember the dream, but it had left me the flavour of a festival, like my father's name day), I went out on the roof with my signal code in one hand and the field glasses in the other. For more than an hour I danced and watched Valentina's dances. Three times she put one hand to her waist and raised the other in the air. She was coming to see me. I told her that we were going to Mass at the convent, and that if she went there we should be together. We already knew the poses of our code by heart, and we made them quickly, in a graceful succession. The cats watched me, more astonished than ever, and not even my red cat dared to come near me.

My hand was much the same. I did not think of it. The flow of blood had stopped, and my thumb was rapidly becoming inflamed. Valentina's little handkerchief, which had gone round it three times before, now only went round it twice. It hurt less, but if I ran or did anything that required an effort I felt it throbbing painfully. The only thing that troubled me about it was keeping it hidden.

Valentina and her mother came to Mass at the convent, and Pilar and her father went later at the parish church. We talked to each other in church. Over her bunch of white and green flowers she wore a small black veil, which she pushed back from her ear to hear me better — I spoke in a whisper — and perhaps also to show me her ear, which pleased me so much and which was always nicely washed.

But — alas! — things had changed. Her cousin's parents were to spend the day at her house and take the boy away in the evening, the maid was not there to come and get her at my house, and her mother would not let her go out. To make up for this, Valentina told me the dream that she had had with the olives and the glass of water: My hand was well again and I went to her house and killed her cousin and her cousin's own father said afterwards, 'It's a good thing he's dead because he was as stupid as a tame duck'. Her cousin did in some way resemble a duck, and I burst out laughing.

At that instant, Mosén Joaquín, who was saying Mass, turned round to say, '*Dominus vobiscum*,' and looked at me meaningly. Valentina's mother, who was uneasy over our whispering, made us keep still. At the elevation of the Host the bells rang like crystal. Mosén Joaquín, grave and concentrated, elevated the sacred form. Valentina put on the devout and contrite expression which her mother had taught her, but she kept stealing glances at me, and I opened my book of devotions, looking for something. I soon found several lines containing the magic word 'love'. And I read loud enough for Valentina to hear:

'The heart that is bursting with love seeks a safe road, and in vain love shows it one road after another, and the heart goes on blindly, burning with disillusion and impatience, until it meets with Thee.'

Valentina searched her little white book with gilded clasps, and found:

'Lord God of Hosts, behold me a slave at Thy feet, speaking with Thy voice and awaiting a look from Thine eyes.'

That sounded very good. Valentina nudged me and explained with satisfaction, 'The place to read is in the part in italics where it says "Words of the Enamoured Soul seeking God".'

Her mother began saying 'sh-h-h' again. We opened our books of devotion once more, and Valentina pointed out the place, spelling out the title 'in italics': 'Words of the Enamoured Soul seeking God.' It was easier for her than for me, because the soul is feminine and so what it said was appropriate. I decided to change the gender in my invocations, but as I was reading her a beautiful sentence I came unexpectedly on the word 'immolation'. And I did not know what to do with it. It was impossible for me to pronounce it straight through without hesitating. Besides, I had no idea what it meant. But Valentina had taken her turn:

'My perverted flesh goes to the deceitful world of pleasure, but my soul seeks and finds Thee, O Lord.'

'The effluvium,' I read with difficulty, 'of Thine insubstan . . . insubstantial divine love heals my wounds.'

My book was full of strange words, but looking further I found in another section, also in italics, entitled 'Words of God to the Enamoured Soul'. I showed it to Valentina, much pleased, and said, without any modesty:

'I am God and you are the Enamoured Soul.'

'Yes. I,' she repeated slowly, 'am the Enamoured Soul.'

But she started reading her book with a solemn intonation:

'Like the flowers in the fields and the wind in the woods, like the singing of the stream and the breath of spring, my enamoured soul feels Thee by my side, O Lord.'

'Flee the world and its deceits, put out of mind the impurities of the flesh, and raise thyself to Me if thou wilt have eternal life.'

¹ 'As he who is thirsty goes to the spring, as he who is sad seeks after consolation, so do I seek after Thee, my Love.'

'Come unto Me and slumber in My lap.'

That seemed to me very appropriate, because Valentina liked to be kissed when she went to sleep. Then Valentina read a long paragraph:

'My whole being trembles before Thy greatness, yet it knows that to come to Thee there is the way of love and to Thee it comes, seeking peace, rest, ambr . . . ambrosia, O Lord, in Whom all beauty waits to receive me, O Lord of love, of wisdom, and of power.'

Instead of reading myself, I leaned toward Valentina:

'Read that again.'

She sweetly obeyed. That ending, 'O Lord of love, of wisdom, and of power,' left me confused. Valentina repeated it a third time. At that moment the organ sounded from behind the high screen of the cloisters.

' . . . of love, of wisdom, and of power.'

I had let my book fall (my wounded hand was numb), and with an entire lack of gallantry I let Valentina pick it up for me. When she gave it to me I kissed her hand. Valentina

closed her book, smiled, and stood up for the end of the Mass. I too. She said to me, 'I'll learn that part by heart so that I can say it to you when I am alone at home.'

I continued to feel a strange greatness, which dissolved with the voices of the organ into the dimness of the church. I could have flown and routed armies, even without a narrow bridge. Without knowing what I was thinking or feeling I looked at a statue of Saint Sebastian in a niche in the wall, almost naked and stuck full of arrows. Mosén Joaquín turned to us with a rustle of his starched alb: '*Ite, missa est.*' Valentina crossed herself. She had a rosary of little yellow beads wound round her wrist. She was dressed in white, and her dark face, the colour of brick, seemed luminous. I looked at her. She told me that when her cousin and her aunt and uncle had gone, in the evening, I could go out on the roof and talk to her. I added, 'Even if it is very late, you mustn't fail to go on the roof. If it's dark, I'll bring my flashlight and put it by my feet so you can see me.'

'But can you see with field glasses at night?'

'Yes, just the same as in the daytime.'

She was smiling all the time we talked, but I was very serious. 'Lord of love, of wisdom, and of power.' I would have abandoned everything — parents, brothers, and sisters, studies, the safety of home — to walk the roads until the end of the world, or the end of my life, hand in hand with Valentina, listening to her speak those words. That, for me, was everything.

I gave her the handkerchief from my thumb.

'Take it. I don't need it now because it's stopped bleeding.'

'And who will take care of it for you to-day?'

She warned me that I ought to put on a new dressing of cotton and eau de Cologne. And she wanted to be at my side to blow on it for me.

We went out of the church. In the vestibule I kissed Valentina twice on the cheek. Her mother — of whom I was very fond — gave me a kiss. I found that my elder sister was right

when she said that Doña Julia put too much powder on her nose, and just as I was starting off the sacristan came up to me and said:

‘Mosén Joaquín wants you to go to him in the sacristy.’

I re-entered the church. In the sacristy, which was very small and placed behind the altar, there was a turntable fixed in the wall. It turned on its axis, and through it the nuns sent their chaplain the wine for the Mass, the hosts to be consecrated, and the little starched cloths which were used to cover the chalice. Through the turntable likewise a nasal voice would occasionally be heard, saying, ‘Hail Mary immaculate!’

Mosén Joaquín would lean toward it and speak in his strong, rustic voice:

‘What is it?’

The answer to the nasal voice was supposed to be ‘Conceived without sin’, but Mosén Joaquín did not seem to rate the nuns’ ceremoniousness very highly. They would say something on the other side in a sorrowful whine, as if one of them had died, and the priest would answer a little brutally. I found it very diverting.

‘I sent for you,’ he said to me, ‘to tell you that we will not have lessons to-morrow.’

What could be happening? Perhaps a visit from some relative, or a great religious festival in the convent. Mosén Joaquín looked at me wonderingly, as though he had noticed something he had never seen before.

‘Did you hear me?’

‘Yes, but what is happening?’

‘There is to be an eclipse, and we are going to observe it. Have you a pair of dark glasses at home?’

‘No.’

‘A field glass?’

I said yes and that I would bring it. It was an eclipse of the sun. After that, Mosén Joaquín paused and looked at me again, wonderingly.

'How old are you?'

'Ten and a half.'

He continued to look at me. I asked him what 'immolation' meant, and he told me, smiling. Then he asked me to come up on to his terrace. I had breakfasted, but he gave me some fruit and sweets. On his table there was always a mechanical lighter and an ashtray full of cigarette ends. To-day the ashtray was clean.

'What do you want to be in life?' he asked me suddenly.

'Oh, I . . . nothing.'

'What do you mean, nothing? That is not possible. You have to be something.'

He seemed to be waiting for an answer.

'Nothing,' I repeated. 'What I am.'

Mosén Joaquín opened his eyes in surprise.

'What you are?'

'Yes.'

Mosén Joaquín walked silently up and down the carpet, accentuating his limp a little.

'And what are you?'

He realized that it would be difficult for me to answer.

'Don't you want to answer me?'

'Well, I'm — who I am.'

'Good, I agree. But exactly what is your "who I am"?''

In a rush of untrammelled sincerity, I said:

'Since you insist, I will tell you. I am the lord of love, of wisdom, and of power.'

I saw that he wanted to laugh and that he restrained himself as if he realized that he was about to do something offensive. In order to keep from laughing, he put on an appearance of severity:

'And since when have you known that you are all that?'

'Since this morning.'

Mosén Joaquín said: 'I have no doubt that you are what you say you are, but other people find it difficult to accept

such convictions, and I think you had better keep it to yourself, don't you?"

I would not give in.

'You are right about that. But I don't need to have anyone else accept them.'

'Why?'

'There is a person to whom I am these things, and that is all I need.'

'There is such a person? Who? A girl?'

'Yes.'

'Valentina, the notary's daughter?'

'Yes.'

'I do not doubt it, my son. But every man must make himself worthy of his own thoughts of himself. I mean he must work, he must develop the gifts which God has given him.'

I was drunk with myself; it was this that the priest had seen when I entered the sacristy.

We arranged that I should bring my binoculars the next morning, and, with the prospect of two days without lessons before me, I walked home. I went through Nun's Alley, passed the bishop's cousin on her balcony with a flower in her hair as usual, and went through the back door and into the poultry yard — not without having heard Clara make a pitying allusion to my bare knees.

The family had gone to Mass at the parish church. They concurred with that other world in which Dona Arturo and Pilar lived, even in the choice of a church. I kept my wounded hand out of sight. Nobody had noticed it. The secret of it, which I shared with Valentina, enchanted me. Being my sweetheart, she had to believe what I told her, and I had been too confident when I belittled her cousin's rifle to leave her any room to be afraid.

I went up to the roof several times, but she did not appear. I resigned myself, and sat down against the chimney and played with the red cat. I went in and got my book of

astronomical geography to find out what an eclipse really was, but I did not understand it very well. All I learned was that there were total eclipses and partial eclipses. Mosén Joaquín had not told me which kind to-morrow's was to be, and I returned to his house to ask him; I wanted to dazzle the family. He told me that it would be partial and would hardly be visible except as a slight decrease in the sun's brightness. It would be caused by the moon passing in front of the sun's disk.

'But you, who are the lord of wisdom — don't you know all about it?'

I heard him laugh, half aghast and half benevolent.

During dinner I announced that there was to be an eclipse. At first no one heard me. My mother said:

'Put your other hand on the table.'

I did so, hiding my thumb; but a little later, without realizing it, I had it in my lap again. I repeated what I had said about the eclipse, and my father immediately became attentive:

'What? An eclipse?'

I elaborated. It would not be total, the sun would lose a little of its light and the moon would pass in front of the sun's disc.

My sister Maruja said, with her mouth full:

'Nonsense. There isn't any moon in the daytime.'

'Yes there is, but we don't see it,' said Concha.

My father favoured this explanation, and I put my tongue out at Maruja, who protested:

'Mamma!'

My mother told me again to eat with both hands, and I put my left hand beside my plate but I did not use it because I could not hold a fork with it. When the meat was served, since I could not cut it I said that I was not hungry. My mother insisted angrily and I thought I was lost, but my father intervened:

'Don't force him to eat if he doesn't want to.'

I felt grateful to him, and when he asked me more questions about the eclipse I brought out everything I knew, mentioning in passing the planets which were nearer to the sun than the earth and those which were farther from it. When I spoke of the rings of Saturn, Maruja said: -

‘Nonsense.’

She was disgusted because I had become the centre of attention.

My mother kept her eyes on me.

‘Put your hand on the table. And don’t make me say it again.’

I did so, artfully. No one would have supposed that I had a lead bullet in my thumb. Although it was considerably inflamed, I could still bend it inward.

My father asked for the paper, perhaps intending to read about the eclipse, and my mother said that she remembered a total eclipse which occurred when she was my age. It became dark as night at midday, and the chickens and pigeons went to roost, and the cook was as stupid as they were because she asked whether she should cook dinner or supper. Maruja burst out laughing. My father left the newspaper beside his napkin without having opened it or taken off the wrapper. There it still lay in the evening at supper time. During supper I talked about the eclipse again.

‘How is it that you know so much about it?’ asked Concha.

‘I know everything.’

‘You say you know everything?’ my father asked.

‘Yes,’ I said simply. ‘Everything.’

I was in a bad humour because I had not been able to communicate with Valentina from the roof all afternoon. However, I felt sure of the evening, and I had my field glasses and my flashlight laid out ready on the bed upstairs. No one could make me explain in concrete terms what I had in mind when I said ‘everything’.

‘And how do you happen to know everything?’ my father asked banteringly.

‘Because I do.’

‘You remind me of Escamillo, our old coachman. Every year when the special preachers come for Lent he goes to church and listens to them with his mouth wide open, and afterwards he shrugs his shoulders and says, “Bah, that’s just what I was going to say myself”. He has done that for seventy years. He knows everything, too.’

I was offended and said nothing. I hid my hand, which was really hurting me. As we did not eat meat at night I did not have to use my knife or hold my fork in my left hand. My father insisted:

‘How do you happen to know everything?’

I stood up, throwing my napkin down on the table and pushing my chair back:

‘No way.’

A chill passed over the table. I walked slowly away and disappeared in the direction of my room. My father muttered:

‘That is no way for a boy his age to behave.’

My mother looked at him sorrowfully.

I I I

I WANTED to be alone because I was in a hurry to be on the roof. I collected my instruments and climbed out on all fours. I looked through the field glasses in vain; I could see nothing. Things far away had disappeared and Valentina’s house was sunk in shadow. I became confused, focusing on lighted windows behind which vague shapes were visible. The sky was clear, and there was no moon. Perhaps the moon would rise later. But Valentina could not stay there all night; they would make her go to bed. I thought that perhaps she was watching for me and turned on my flashlight. It gave a very bright light; it was a large flashlight,

and though it was called a 'pocket' one, no pocket would hold it. Propped between two tiles, it threw its beam on me. And sure that Valentina was watching me with her glasses, I spent more than an hour opening my arms, letting them fall, raising one leg, squatting down, and as I made all my motions quite fast it was like a dance. I repeated the 'Words of God to the Enamoured Soul' for Valentina:

'Come hither and sleep in my lap.'

And then I added:

'Come to me, who am the lord of love and power.'

I did not dare to say anything about 'wisdom'.

And my father had come upstairs to watch me. He saw it all and went away without speaking.

But the next day he came to my room as soon as it was light. He was obviously worried. He sighed, he gave in to me over everything. He kept calling me 'son'. Later I learned that my father was thinking of a relative who had died in a lunatic asylum; he had long feared that one of us might 'take after him'.

'Get dressed quickly,' he said, 'we're going out.'

I obeyed, feeling curious. The only thought in my mind was the eclipse, which was to be at eleven o'clock. My father did not believe that there was to be an eclipse — he supposed that was part of my mania.

'What were you doing last night on the roof?' he asked me, as if it were not of much importance. 'Was it something connected with the eclipse?'

I saw that he had offered me a good explanation, and said yes. I did not think that he referred to my dancing but simply to the fact of my being on the roof. My father sighed and went to the dining-room with me, where we breakfasted; then we went out into the street.

We went straight to the doctor's house. The doctor was an old man, kind-hearted and quite mad.

He had just risen; he came to us with his newspaper open in his hands and said cheerfully:

'There is to be an eclipse to-day, Don José.'

My father appeared to be much surprised. He asked the doctor to examine me. He made a sign to the doctor's wife, who took me into the next room, while the two of them remained together talking. My father wanted the doctor to tell him frankly whether my case was serious. The doctor listened without half hearing what he said. When my father, who was unwilling to use such words as 'madness' or 'idiocy' even to himself, spoke of 'serious upsets', the doctor lost patience and said, 'Well, let me take a look at him'. Having me there in person, he did not care what my father might have to say about me. And the good doctor repeated:

'An eclipse. With a piece of smoked glass, we shall be able to see it.'

Then, indicating the newspaper, he said that it was curious that 'science could predict them thousands of years ahead', and that it gave him great hopes for the future of humanity. My father obstinately called his attention to 'my condition', but the doctor interrupted him:

'I'll go and take a look at him now.' He hated family diagnoses. He rose and came in, telling my father that it would be better if he waited. My father waited, walking up and down, intensely nervous.

When I saw the doctor come in I thought: 'I've been found out. My father has found out, and does not want to reproach me.' I felt grateful to him for his delicacy. The doctor came in and said to his wife:

'Undress him.'

She was younger than he and very agreeable. She began to take off my clothes. It made me feel somewhat ashamed, but each time I was about to protest the doctor said implacably: 'Undress him.' He looked to see if there was a fire in the fireplace. By now I was stark naked and the doctor began his examination. He kept making gestures of surprise; he seemed to be disappointed. Then he asked me, as if he were irritated:

'Where is the pain?'

'Here.' I held out my hand.

The doctor asked what had happened and began to gesticulate and shout when he heard that I had a bullet in my hand. He went out of the room and spoke to my father.

'Why didn't you bring him sooner, Don José? What could you have been thinking of? And I haven't even an X-ray machine!'

My father listened doubtfully.

'An X-ray machine?'

'Yes. We can't have everything in a town like this. And an X-ray would make it much easier. But, in any case we must do something at once. If he had come a day later I should have had to amputate.'

My father could not understand a word of what he was saying.

'Allow me —' he said.

But the doctor did not 'allow' him. His patients' relatives annoyed him.

'The boy seems brave, but without an anaesthetic it will hurt him. And I don't want to give him a general anaesthetic. If I had an ampule of cocaine, that would do nicely.'

I saw that everything was becoming terribly complicated.

'Can I go to see the eclipse?' I asked timidly.

The doctor said to himself, 'The boy is my kind,' and, after a moment's hesitation, asked:

'Will you be brave?' and without waiting for an answer added: 'Let's get started.'

He began taking scalpels, bistouries, and cotton out of a glazed cabinet.

His wife made me sit down in a chair and stood behind me, holding my head against her chest. The doctor said:

'Are you going to cry much?'

I answered him by smiling ironically, which seemed to satisfy him. But he went to another cabinet and took out a large clean handkerchief which he handed me:

'If it hurts you, bite on that. It doesn't matter if you tear it.'

And the operation began. The doctor cut and scraped; I felt the cold steel inside my thumb. I moaned softly once or twice, like a 'grown-up'. It never occurred to me to cry. I suppose that my father, hearing me from the other room, did not know what to make of it. .

The operation ended with the doctor extracting the bullet and sewing up my thumb. He and his wife bandaged my hand in gauze and cotton and put it in a sling, and the doctor led me into the other room, carrying the bullet in a pair of tweezers.

'A hero,' he said, 'a real hero.'

My father took the bullet in his hand without knowing what to think and looked at my arm with its bandages and the sling. The doctor asked me:

'How did it happen?'

'An accident,' I answered, shrugging my shoulders.

My father looked from my thick white layers of cotton to the doctor and demanded an explanation, if there was any explanation.

The doctor turned to my father:

'Nothing easier. You brought the boy here with a gunshot wound, and I have extracted the projectile.'

My father stared at me, open-mouthed:

'We have all of us gone mad.'

Then, suddenly calm again, he turned to me and added:

'Explain this to me, son.'

'Let him alone,' the doctor said. 'Let him alone now, and I'll come and see him to-morrow.'

'Can he get back home on foot?' my father asked.

'Yes, but first I'll give him a little glass of something I have here.'

The doctor's wife, who reminded me of Valentina's mother although there was no powder on her nose, came in with a vial of some liquid which she was stirring with a glass rod.

The doctor waved her away:

'None of that. We don't give boys like you orange-flower water, we give them a good glass of wine.'

Turning to my father, he added:

'It is the fine wine Mosén Joaquín says Mass with. I send the nuns purges, and they send me their wine.'

My father did not know whether to laugh with the doctor, to condole with me, or to scold us both. The doctor's wife came back with a glass. The wine was a dirty white and smelled delicious.

'Bring another for Don José — he needs it more than the boy does.'

My father declined, took me by the hand, and we went out.

On the way I could see that my father was impatient to learn what had happened, but he refrained from asking questions. When we reached home he retired to the library and told me to go and lie down for a while but not to undress. My mother was in another part of the house and did not see us come in. I was thinking of Valentina and of going out on the roof, but I found the window in the storeroom nailed up. As if that were not enough, it was also made fast by two wooden cross pieces, so that I could not even dream of getting it open. Particularly with one hand in a sling.

I came downstairs, furious, and went to my tutor's house with the field glasses hung round my neck. I had to give a long explanation on the subject of my arm. The eclipse was not at all spectacular. Mosén Joaquín had smoked a number of pieces of glass to look at it through, but by smoking the big lenses of my field glasses we were able to see everything much nearer and more clearly. Mosén Joaquín tried holding different pieces of smoked glass in front of my eyes; then he said I should use the field glasses. So we passed the morning. It was a bore.

I went home thinking of Valentina. Arriving by way of Nun's Alley, I found her walking arm in arm with one of my sisters in the open space in front of the carriage-house.

When they saw me they both burst out laughing. I could not believe that my arm in its sling was so funny; but that was not the reason; it turned out that the end of my nose was black with soot from the pieces of smoked glass my tutor had held in front of my eyes. Part of my forehead, too. When I found out I tried to wipe it off, but they told me I was only making it worse, and we decided that they would wash my face for me. It all turned into a joke, and I came out of it with a clean face but with a slight feeling of resentment toward Mosén Joaquín. To make a fool of me after he had heard me say that I was the 'lord of wisdom, love, and power'! I began teasing my sister, although it was not Maruja but Luisa, who usually behaved well toward me. She finally said:

'What you would like is for me to go away and leave you alone with Valentina, because she's your sweetheart.'

She left us to ourselves. Valentina asked me if the doctor had hurt me, and I told her that he was going to cut off my arm but that he had no anaesthetic so he had left it for another time.

'Is he really going to cut off your arm?' she asked, wide-eyed.

'Yes, but it doesn't matter, because it will grow again.'

And I told her the story of the eight brothers who were born with wings. An old woman like Aunt Ignacia wove shirts for them out of cobwebs. When she had finished a shirt and one of the boys put it on his wings fell off and his arms grew. But their old Aunt Ignacia died without finishing the last shirt. It had only one sleeve. And one of the brothers grew up with one arm and one wing. The fact that their wings fell off and their arms grew for such a simple reason ought to keep Valentina from being afraid. If my arm was cut off another one would take its place.

Valentina had no doubt of it, and I kissed her several times. The pigeons came, but not as close as they usually did because Valentina was there. She went a little distance away and I showed her all my tricks. The pigeons lighted on my

shoulder and then, balancing themselves with their wings, climbed my arm to my hand, which I was holding up full of corn. When I got tired of it, I joined Valentina and told her that I did not like them because they only came for something to eat.

Valentina looked in her pocket and took out a piece of paper on which she had written the words which the Soul speaks to the Bridegroom. I read it aloud, kept it as a tribute which was my due, and, remembering the information Mosén Joaquín had given me in the sacristy, said:

‘Now I must perform an immolation for you.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The homage that the ancients paid to what they adored.’

‘And you adore me?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you don’t tell me to kiss you? If you don’t tell me to kiss you, I can’t.’

It was true that when I kissed her she never returned my kiss. Now I said to her:

‘Kiss me.’

Valentina put her two hands on my shoulders and kissed me on either cheek.

‘Say that you liked it.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘But now I must perform an immolation for you.’

I went back where the pigeons were and held up my hand, full of corn. Three or four came immediately. I caught one by the feet. It was pure white; it beat its wings desperately.

‘Go to the kitchen and get a knife.’

She was afraid to, because she had been given a thrashing at home for taking a knife. Oh, a thrashing — I thought — and she isn’t ashamed to say so!

I handed her the pigeon. Valentina wanted to be brave, but she was afraid it would peck her. I showed her how she should hold it for a minute while I went into the house. When the pigeon flapped its wings hard she

shut her eyes and gritted her teeth but she did not let it go.

I went to my room and returned with the dagger. My tutor had told me that there were many different kinds of immolations, but that the most usual procedure was to sacrifice a pigeon. There I stood with my dagger.

‘What are you going to do now?’

‘Don’t be afraid — I shan’t do anything to you.’

‘What am I to do?’

‘Lie down and shut your eyes.’

Valentina obeyed. I quickly but carefully swept the space around her with a bundle of olive twigs. The traces of the twigs made a sort of halo on the ground. Valentina continued to hold the pigeon’s feet fast, her two hands brought together at the level of her waist. The bird had ceased to flap its wings. When I thought everything was in order, it occurred to me that I might have done my sweeping before Valentina lay down.

Then I took the dove in my good hand, held it against the ground by standing on its wings, and thrust my dagger into its body. Its breast was the whitest part of it, and the blood was so red that it seemed to shed light. I picked it up in my good hand and sprinkled the ground all around Valentina. Then I let some of the blood drop on her breast, on her arms and legs, and even on her hair. The pigeon was no longer alive and looked like an old rag.

‘And now what will you do with the pigeon?’

We sat down and plucked its feathers so that we could give it to the dog. We took it to him, and he received it with great satisfaction. Later, the presence of the remains of the pigeon between our dog’s paws gave rise to lengthy family discussions. No one could believe that a bulldog chained to a stairway could catch a pigeon, pluck its feathers, and eat it.

We ran through the yards, the stables, the upper galleries, and Valentina’s dress and arms and legs dried but the stains remained. They were dark brown. A maid came for her and she went home. I went to my room. I was sweating; my feet

were burning in my boots. I took off my boots, then my socks, and put on a pair of old slippers. The pleasure of it made me close my eyes, and I thought of Valentina. We had agreed that when she did it she would think of me too.

Valentina arrived home covered with bloodstains, and caused a sensation. Her mother searched her in vain for non-existent wounds. Pilar looked at her scornfully. Valentina kept our secret. No one could have made her confess.

I had shut myself in my room. My mother had been calling me for some time. I did not answer, sure that when they saw I did not come they would leave me in peace; instead, I opened my notebook of Latin declensions and went on with the 'Universiad'. That is, I began over again, for I crossed out the nursery song, which had no connection with my idea, and, feeling tremendously inspired, wrote:

In the beginning everything was dark.
The birds, the fish, the trees.
Men there were not yet.
But had there been, they too must have been black,
Because there was not light for anyone.
And still there was no day and it was always night
And the animals, the fishes, and the plants,
The birds and the men,
The men who were not yet,
To know themselves must wait,
Wait, wait, forever wait,
The coming of a storm, of lightning-flashes.
God did not want to put light in the world,
And lingered for a million million centuries
Before he made it, for he did not want
Anyone to see his work,
Because he was ashamed to have it seen
Until there were palaces, until there were fountains
And nightingales, and until the birth
Of our two mothers, Valentina's and mine.

I went on, writing with great facility, trying to remember what I could of the account of the creation in Genesis so as to keep in accord with at least the order in which things were made.

But my mother continued to call me, and I went downstairs. She stroked my bandaged hand and asked me if it hurt, rearranged my sling, and, seeing bloodstains on my cuffs, was horrified.

‘It’s not my blood,’ I said, to pacify her.

‘Whose is it then?’

‘It’s from the immolation.’

My mother pressed me so with questions, entreaties, and bribes that I had to make a great effort to keep the secret of my wound. At last she admitted defeat and begged me not to go on the roof and to study hard so as not to anger my father.

‘But isn’t it possible to live without studying?’ I asked.

‘It is possible but it is not right. Everyone must work.’

‘Aunt Ignacia’s husband never studied.’

‘But he is a labourer. I don’t think you would like that.’

‘Why not? If Valentina would like to live the way Aunt Ignacia does, it wouldn’t matter to me.’

My mother looked at me in horror:

‘Don’t let your father hear you say that,’ she said.

The following days things grew worse. Valentina had been punished for the bloodstains. She did not come to see me. I could not go out on the roof because, apart from the window’s being nailed up, my bandaged hand made certain movements impossible. And the doctor did not take off the dressing until the fifth day. During those days I did not see Valentina, and I could only learn from stray bits of information that she was still in disgrace, and that she spent her days sitting at the piano, crying because she could not visit me, and practising scales. My thumb was almost well, and I was only wearing a glove with the four fingers cut off to hold down the light strips of gauze which were all the dressing it now needed. As long as I wore the sling I met with a degree

of tolerance. Mosén Joaquín explained my lessons to me and did not ask me to recite. But the day came when my hand was well again and the window was still nailed up and Valentina was away and my father was in a rage because he could not make me confess what had caused my wound. I would not study. My father, on one of his excursions to my room, found the 'Universiad' and tore it up. He threw the pieces into the fireplace. I began over again the same day:

In the beginning everything was dark,
The trees, the birds, the fish . . .

I persuaded Concha to deliver to Valentina a large sheet of paper on which I had drawn a brightly coloured flower. Innumerable petals fell from it, each one a different colour, and in the centre of each petal was a sentence from the Words of God to the Enamoured Soul. My sister assured me that she had given it to Valentina and that the poor child was condemned to study the piano seven hours a day. Concha knew a good many grown-up secrets, and she told me that my father was in a bad mood because the bank was asking him for some sort of guarantees to cover the operations of another landowner for whom he had given a guarantee. My father had perpetual dealings with banks. Almost every day he received a letter from one bank or another, and it seems that he owed money amounting to something more than the value of our properties. Until now, however, he had never been placed in a difficult situation. The banks themselves seemed to want to make things easy for him, and my father sometimes boasted that richer men than he could not get loans from the banks without his signature. It was on such an occasion that the present misfortune had befallen him, according to what Concha said.

Mosén Joaquín tried once more to be patient with me. But a day came when he could no longer contain himself. When he handed me my notebook I saw the well-known scribble,

this time with a figure 30 beside it. Thirty strokes. Very well. All these days I had been trying to reach a decision. I was almost glad, because now I should be forced to take some step which would change my existence. Fortunately, my father was not at home when I came in and was not expected back until evening. On account of the banking trouble he had gone to the country, to a friend's estate. I kept my oilcloth-covered notebook to myself and talked more than ever at dinner. I looked around the table and said:

'It is all over. Things are going to be different. I cannot breathe this air any longer.' The family asphyxiated me, or so I thought.

And at nightfall I stuck my pistols in my belt, put my air rifle over my shoulder, and, with the 'Universiad' in my trousers pocket, went quietly out the front door and walked down the street.

I left the town, got into open country, and, forsaking the road where I might perhaps meet someone I knew, set out across the fields toward the distant blue mountains. I had left a letter saying that they were not to think of me again, that I was going to Zaragoza to live my own life. I knew, from having heard people say so, that Zaragoza lay beyond the blue mountains. I thought that I could get there before midnight, but the distance was over fifty miles.

And was I going to abandon Valentina? But I felt sure that as soon as I told her where I was she would hurry to my side. On I went, and everything looked pleasant and familiar — the green trees, the dry bushes, the roots of the oaks, the red rocks. A poem shaped itself in my imagination, modelled on a popular song:

All in my father's garden
There grows a little vine.
Tell no one, no one, no one!
Let it be yours and mine.
'Twas you, 'twas you

I saw beneath the yew!
I knew, I knew
How fair and firm you grew.
For you, for you
Turtledove and turtle true. . . .

I dedicated it to Valentina.

I thought it must be very late. However, I should have gone on if I had not come to the river, a river so swift that it could not be forded. I looked in vain for a bridge. It would have been better — I thought — to stay on the road that leads to the bridge; but I could not find that either. And I was hungry and sleepy. Nothing would make me return home. Neither did I want to go near the town, because they must be searching for me.

In my uncertainty I saw, quite far behind me, a house with smoke coming out of the chimney. It was Valentina's house, but not the side of it that I was accustomed to see from mine. I tried to think what to do, but before I had made up my mind I found myself walking toward the house. Although my desire to go to Valentina's house had awakened only at the last minute, the truth was that when I first thought of running away it was what I had subconsciously intended. I reached the garden gate, entered it, and had the good fortune to encounter Doña Julia coming out of the house behind the maid who used to come for Valentina. Night fell at six o'clock, and although I had been wandering in the dark for two hours it could not be much later than eight. I told Doña Julia that nothing in the world would make me go back to my home and that I wanted to stay here with Valentina forever. Doña Julia took me into the house, remembering that she had been surprised one day not long before to hear Maruja, who was playing with her dolls at home and chattering to them, say quite reasonably: 'If Pepe and Valentina love each other, why don't they get engaged and marry?' I looked everywhere for Valentina but did not see her. Her

mother told me that she had gone to spend the day with her cousins in the next town, and that Julián (the cousin I had met) was spending the day here in exchange. Valentina would be arriving any minute — her uncle was driving her over in his carriage and would take the boy back with him.

At that moment the boy appeared in the hall.

'I've already met him,' I said. 'Come on in, don't be afraid. Who are you?'

Valentina's mother looked at us in surprise:

'You know who he is — Señor Azcona's son.'

'Excuse me,' I interrupted. 'Let him answer.'

And with great emphasis I asked him again:

'*Whose* son are you?'

'Me?'

'Yes, you.'

He looked at my hand, not understanding how I could still have all five fingers and no bandages.

'I am the son,' he blurted out, 'of a nefarious politician.'

Doña Julia retired to the kitchen to laugh. A little later she returned:

'My son,' she said, 'the whole town is out looking for you. I have sent word home that you are here.'

'I won't go home.'

'No,' she said. 'No one will make you.'

Soon after, Valentina and the 'nefarious politician' arrived. I pretended to be busy with something until he and his son had gone. Pilar had come too. She looked at me from the height of her twelve years, and the notary walked up and down, occasionally coming to a stand in front of me:

'This business of running away from home couldn't be worse. But if you will study I will let you live here.'

At home, they were so happy to know where I was that they did nothing about making me come back. We dined in state, with the notary at the head of the table. Before we had finished, the maid announced that, in case she should forget

it, she had brought my books from home and had just left them on the table outside. After dinner Don Arturo went to his club. Across the table Valentina pretended to be doing needlework. Her mother watched us tenderly. She had told her husband that he ought not to stay out late because he would need to have a clear head for work the following day. He was preparing for an examination for a better position. His wife had rosy ideas of the future, expecting that the new position would make him rich. (And so, as I learned, it later came to pass.)

I looked at Valentina without speaking. The white collar of her dress, her jet-black hair, which was tousled over her forehead and temples and which on holidays she twisted into ringlets behind her ears. Every one of her glances bestowed an unexpected value on all those charms which it seemed no one was as well aware of as I was. I had written several new stanzas of the 'Universiad', and I wanted to take advantage of our silence and privacy to read them to her. Pilar kept entering and leaving the room; her exaggerated walk and the way she called the maid or spoke to her mother denoted an insolent disrespect. I read the beginning of my 'Universiad'. Valentina did not understand a word of it, but she felt herself caught up in the fire of my enthusiasm, sensing it with the excitement of some small wild creature. When I had finished she asked me about my troubles with my family. Her mother began to listen attentively. Perhaps she wanted to find out which had had the greater influence on my decision, my hatred of my father or my love for Valentina. Pilar felt offended by the indifference of three people to whom she seemed to mean nothing. But Valentina was perfectly happy; I perceived it in the fragrance of her hair and in the serene friendliness of her looks. I suddenly said to her mother:

'Doña Julia, I want to go to bed.'

'So early?'

'Yes, because I want to talk to Valentina. We are going to sleep together, aren't we?'

Doña Julia did not know what to answer.

'My dear children,' she said smiling.

Valentina clutched her arm:

'Please, Mamma, please!'

I looked at my sweetheart and thought of the times I had slept in the same bed with my brothers or with boys I knew. It had always been uninteresting and uncomfortable, but the possibility of having Valentina beside me in bed made me feel an emotion close to tears. Doña Julia did not answer and, perhaps to ease the situation, asked Pilar to sit down at the piano. Pilar did not want to play 'for us'. However, she would mind it less if Valentina played too. As she could not say so, she announced that she really didn't know anything but the two sonatas for four hands. Everything about Pilar was false and affected. Valentina rose and took her place at the piano. Doña Julia seemed pleased, but I was annoyed at having to listen to Pilar at the same time as Valentina. The piano sounded cold and crystalline. Valentina had the bass part; they went wrong twice, and both times Pilar tried to put the blame on her sister. I intervened. I turned to Doña Julia, because I did not want to start a discussion with Pilar, and said that Pilar had bigger hands and because she had studied longer she knew the sonata perfectly and played it too fast. Pilar answered me angrily. Although she used other words, she tried to tell me that I was a blockhead and ought to go back to my books. Her mother remonstrated:

'Pili!'

I seized the opportunity to say in a low voice:

'Pili! That's the name of the ugliest cat we have!'

Valentina burst out laughing, and Pilar said that she would not play any more. The evening seemed to be becoming complicated, and Doña Julia said it was bedtime. I still believed that Valentina and I would sleep together. My disappointment when I was undeceived made me wary in matters of love, which appeared not to give one the freedom of a better world but merely to be a continuation of the

troubles engendered by family, studies, and the general course of life. Doña Julia found a reasonable excuse:

'If you sleep in the same bed you will talk all night and not get any rest at all.'

Pilar disappeared into the kitchen again:

'Sleep in the same bed! I never heard of such a thing in all my life!'

I V

BUT the next morning Valentina brought me my breakfast in bed, just as she brought her father his. She explained that she had already had breakfast and that she was very fond of coffee with milk in it. She took it with more sugar than her sister and not in a cup but in an earthenware dish, an ordinary pot with a lip round the inside, against which she squeezed out as many as six little rolls one after the other with her spoon before she ate them, so that there was always some coffee left for her to drink at the end. Pilar laughed at her for this habit of hers. Valentina repeated that when she woke up she felt famished, and as she said it there was a mysterious light in her eyes. I listened, and her words reached me together with the cooing of pigeons. They had as many pigeons about as we had at home. And watching her, no longer hearing what she was saying, though I knew she was still telling me about her breakfast, I found in her the grace of carved angels, and a reason for the madness of my adventures, from which I always saw myself emerging victorious or dead. Valentina's every gesture and every word, even when I did not catch their meaning, aroused a concrete emotion in me, evoked something that I had already lived or something for which I hoped. Valentina continued talking, and I continued to follow my separate thoughts. I considered them terribly philosophical. Everything is

violent, contrary, and noisy. Arguments with my younger sisters, the clatter of dishes in the kitchen, the gabble of geese and hens and pigeons in the yard. My father's angry face, my mother's sighs. I lived surrounded, enveloped, by all that. And now, by the simple fact of being with Valentina, here was my life changed into a sort of smiling calm. No one could prevent it. Valentina left me, and I dressed and went out. Her house, like mine, was uninhabitable in the morning. At least, it was only habitable for women — no matter where we went, we 'men' were made to feel 'in the way'. Furniture all in the wrong places, feather dusters and cleaning cloths. We could think ourselves lucky if we did not find pails of soapy water running over the floor. Doña Julia told me that I would have to continue my studies, and there was nothing for me to do but to go to Mosén Joaquín's. That is, I intended to go, but I never reached there. I thought it pleasanter to climb the hill and go hunting for male crickets: they would soon begin to chirp, because spring was already on the way. I was very clever at catching them, and when I had no other means at hand of forcing them to come out, I urinated into their burrows, which I could easily distinguish, and they immediately appeared, although never by the entrance into which I had urinated but by another which served as a 'side door'. I could tell the males from the females because they were smaller and their wings were harder. From talking so much about 'male crickets', we boys who hunted them had got into the habit of calling them simply 'males'. I returned to the house long before dinner time, with more than a dozen crickets nestled against my chest under my shirt. When I arrived I showed them to Valentina, and we agreed to go and find more that afternoon. Part of the large garden which surrounded her house was devoted to vegetables; the lettuces already displayed their leaves on the ground with a humid fragrance. Since crickets prefer lettuce to any other food, we let them loose there; and, as it was still long before dinner time, Valentina called to

her mother and asked if we might go to the hill to catch 'males'. Her mother said yes; and, considering that it would not be proper for me to urinate into their burrows in front of Valentina, I took a small watering-can full of water. We returned in time for dinner with two dozen more, for which we had searched not only the hill but the turf of a nearby grove as well. We let them loose in the lettuce patch, where they must have caused great damage, and sat down to dinner. Valentina's father was in a cheerful frame of mind and felt inclined to make a little fun of me. He mentioned goats that ate books, and for the first time in my life I found myself facing a fire of irony in public. But to pacify him I told him that the goats had liked a Latin book of mine much better — they had eaten forty pages of it. Don Arturo laughed at that, and his laughter made a noise like the clatter of wooden rattles in Holy Week.

At home we ate more ascetically. I mean so far as manners are concerned. No one ever saw my father or my mother show any indications of gluttony, of sinful delight in food. We children were brought up in the same way. It was always: 'Keep your mouth closed, don't make a noise, where is your other hand, don't look at someone else's plate, sit up straight.' Not infrequently one of us would be punished by being forced to eat with a book under his arm to remind him not to raise his elbow high enough to hit his neighbour at table in the ear. Whether for better or worse, dinner at home was an orderly affair. Don Arturo's dinner was punctuated by ill-concealed belches, his moustache dripped soup or wine, he heaved a sigh after drinking, talked with his mouth full, and both his hands busy among the side dishes without ever abandoning the main course. He looked drunk, and not from wine, but from the pure pleasure of eating.

'I ran away from home once, too,' he said.

Doña Julia asked him to tell the story, and he told it, never stopping chewing except when he interrupted himself to take a drink from his glass. He dwelt on his fear of his father, and

it was clear that it had been his only motive. He added that when he had gone home he had received a whipping which had taken the skin off his shoulders. When he said 'shoulders' he winked, and they all thought it very funny. I was the only one who did not laugh, and I said that I was not afraid of my father and that no one would whip me if the day ever came when I should be so unfortunate as to have to go home. Don Arturo went to the club again, and I told Doña Julia that I never studied at home until 'the lights were turned on'. She accepted my schedule, and Valentina and I went into the garden. We looked at our crickets. Most of them had chosen the zones they wanted to explore and were hard at work chewing up the tenderest lettuce leaves. They probably thought they were in paradise. When we saw that they had no need of us and that they could not escape because the garden walls were high, we left them to themselves and I went to get my air rifle. I came back with a bag of ammunition (heavy bird shot) hanging from my belt and with a folded sheet of newspaper in my pocket. The paper was a part of my hunting equipment too; before I charged my rifle I had to wrap the shot in a scrap of paper so that it would fit tightly against the inside of the bore. In this way, the projectile was expelled with force, the paper dropped off it, and it flew straight to the mark. Or at least I believed so.

With my rifle charged, we went up on the *solana*, a long, open gallery where there were two folding chairs, several others of straw, a table split by exposure to the weather, and in a corner some packing boxes and pieces of sacking.

'Have you never seen me hunt sparrows?'

I looked around, and once again my eyes were arrested by the pigeons' feeding stand, nailed high up on the wall. It was like a fanciful wooden commode, very narrow and with several perches around a receptacle which held wheat and corn. The sparrows patronized it as much as the pigeons.

We dragged three of the packing boxes to a strategic point and covered them with sacking, leaving room enough be-

tween them for us to sit on the floor side by side. This was to be our ambush. Valentina became excited, watching me coming and going to put the finishing touches to it and talking all the time in a careful whisper. When everything was prepared we crawled inside on our hands and knees.

‘The sparrows that are here now have seen us,’ I said, ‘and none of them will come close. We’ll have to wait until they go away and some new ones come.’

So I put the loaded air rifle at my side and we began to talk in low voices. When Valentina replied, her breath felt hot on my cheek and her hair touched my face.

We heard her mother calling us, but we did not answer. We decided to keep still until she tired of calling, and she went into the house again, saying:

‘Where can those children have gone?’

I said:

‘Tell me about your mother. Who does she like best?’

‘I don’t know. But Mamma is very bad.’

‘Why?’

‘Because she doesn’t want us to grow up.’

‘She doesn’t?’

‘No, she doesn’t. She is always saying that the bigger we get the more trouble we give her and that she wishes we had always stayed two years old.’

I thought this extraordinarily perverse. I looked out through a crack between the sacking and the packing box.

‘Have the sparrows begun to come yet?’

‘A few.’

I could see two males with their black cravats on their breasts. One of them was on the top of a brick pilaster that projected from the wall, the other on the railing of the *solana*. They both looked all around them and then exchanged distrustful glances.

‘Keep quiet.’

‘Why?’

‘You’ll see. There are two males there.’

'Are you going to shoot crickets too?'

'No. Two male sparrows.'

'That's what I thought. Because when crickets are so easy to catch, there's no use shooting them.'

'No. These two have come to see whether we've gone.'

The pigeons came and went with the rustle of silk in their wings. The sparrow on the pilaster gave a hop and flew a little nearer to the grain. Valentina looked out too.

'There he is.'

'No. Wait. When he doesn't see anyone, he'll call the others, and then a lot will come.'

'How will he call them?'

'Like this: "chow, chow".'

Valentina laughed and softly repeated, 'chow, chow'. And a flock of six or seven females flew up and went straight to the food dish. The sparrow on the railing began calling furiously too, as though he were disappointed that the others had stolen a march on him. Many more sparrows flew up, and the eating place was covered with them. Now and again a pigeon grew angry and advanced on one of the sparrows threateningly. But the sparrow would only retreat a little way and flutter around for a moment, then settle again in a different place. I got my rifle ready.

'There are so many of them,' I said, 'that I don't know where to aim.'

But I was a good huntsman who chose his game. I slowly aimed at the male of the flock which was feeding nearest to us. I fired. Valentina drew a deep breath of relief.

'What a fool I am!'

'Why?' I asked, looking at the empty feeding place and searching the ground in vain for my quarry.

'Because I felt afraid.'

'You can talk out loud now. Don't you see that they've all gone?'

The pigeons had gone too, but no farther than the gallery. The sparrows, on the other hand, had not stopped until they

had reached the nearest roofs. I was standing up outside our hiding place.

'Where did you hit him?'

Valentina never doubted for a moment that I had made a bull's-eye, and she came out to look for the sparrow.

'I hit him,' I lied, 'but it was in the foot and he was able to fly away.'

Valentina told me that I should aim at their wings and then they couldn't fly. But they were a long time coming back. And I didn't intend to aim at their wings but at their heads.

Feeling under a cloud of failure, we hid ourselves once more and I drew Valentina to my side.

'That flock,' I said, referring to the sparrows who had escaped, 'are frightened to death; they won't come back to-day. But there's still a chance that some others will.'

'Do they eat only wheat?'

'Who?'

'Sparrows.'

'No. They eat mosquitoes, too.'

'And what do mosquitoes eat?' Valentina was becoming curious. But she clapped her hand to her forehead: 'What a fool I am! Of course I know! They eat people.'

'They do?'

'Yes. One bit me yesterday.'

We talked softly. It enchanted me to whisper to Valentina because it made me feel that we had done something we should be punished for or were just on the verge of doing it. I loaded my gun again and we waited. I did not bother to look through the crack because I knew it was too soon for the sparrows to return. Valentina, who had seen the pigeons angry with sparrows and threatening them, asked:

'Can a pigeon eat a sparrow?'

'No. Pigeons only eat wheat.'

'And corn.'

'Yes. And bread crumbs too.'

'And they don't eat pigeons that are smaller than they are?'

'No. But if they peck them hard they can kill them.'

'Then that's why the sparrows are afraid.'

We waited for a while in silence. The pigeons came back, but not the sparrows. And Valentina said:

'For a sparrow, a pigeon is like a giant is for us.'

'Yes.'

'And have you ever seen any giants?'

'Yes, once.'

'And giants don't eat men, either?'

'No, but they can kill them. I don't think they ever eat them nowadays.'

This seemed to set Valentina's fears at rest. But she did not stop asking questions:

'How many giants did you see?'

'Two. A man-giant and a woman-giant.'

'Did they talk?'

'Yes, but I didn't understand them.'

'What language did they speak?'

'Giant language.'

'Don't you understand it?'

'No. But they don't always talk. They don't talk to us because they know we can't understand them. They just make a sound like "Uuuuuh".'

Valentina was frightened and came closer to me.

'And what is giant language called?'

'Gigantish.'

We remained silent.

'You know everything,' Valentina said.

I took a look around. Valentina looked too.

'There's the same sparrow on the railing.'

'That's very strange.'

I looked again.

'It's not the same one,' I said. 'It looks like him, but it's not the same one.'

'How can you see that?'

'I can't see it, but it's not the same one because the ones that we frightened won't come back until they've been to sleep and forgotten it in their sleep and it will be another day.'

'Oh.'

The sparrow on the railing was another male, with his black decoration on his grey throat. Not far from him, on the same railing, there was a female, smaller, trimmer, and earth-coloured. The male seemed to be scolding her for her imprudent boldness, but she only answered:

'Chow, chow.'

They began to approach. But they did not leave the railing. Valentina's mother called again from the garden. We did not answer. Valentina laughed slyly.

'Those children — where can they have gone?'

She went back into the house.

'Do you know something?' said Valentina contentedly. 'I'd like to stay just like this always. Hiding here, and have them call us, and we not answer.'

I signed to her to be still and began getting my rifle ready again, little by little, being careful not to make the slightest sound. My precautions excited Valentina. She sighed and said:

'Oh, what a fool I am!'

'This time I'm not going to aim at a male because they are too clever and when they hear the report they give a little skip to one side and change their position while the shot is on the way. The females are stupider. You'll see how after I fire they sit still and look around for a second and then give a chirp and fly off.'

I aimed slowly, very slowly. I made up my mind to fire; then I had to wait once more because the sparrow had moved. I aimed all over again, held my breath, and was ready. Valentina put her hand to her throat and sighed: 'Oh, what a fool!' At last I fired. They all flew off again; my quarry did not fall to the ground; not a feather fluttered

in the air; there was no sign that I had hit anything. I was furious. It was not that I had ever killed a sparrow with my rifle, but I had never before had such a perfect opportunity. Valentina looked at me in surprise.

'This rifle doesn't work very well,' I said.

Valentina never doubted.

'It's harder,' she said, to console me, 'to hit one in the beak or the foot than in the body.'

I did not say that I had not aimed there. I carefully closed the gaps in our hiding place. I did not go out as I had the time before. It was obvious that not one had been touched, not one.

They took much longer to return. I amused Valentina by telling her more about giants. She listened with perfect faith. She had seen giants every year in the Corpus Christi procession, seven or eight of them at least, as high as her house, marching in pairs, man-giant and woman-giant; they stopped and danced right in front of her house, opening their arms lightly when they whirled around, and then dancing rigidly in one spot with their arms outstretched. So Valentina believed that all giants were like those, harmless or stupid. But I told her terrible things which made her really afraid, only to revive her again with my prowess and courage.

The sparrows did not come, and I continued to talk in a low voice.

'The giant Caralampio will come to my house one day and carry off Maruja if I tell him to.'

'And Luisa too?'

'No.'

Valentina was silent for a little while, and then she said:

'Luisa is very clever for her age, isn't she? I'd like to have her for a sister.'

A few sparrows appeared, and for the third time I raised my rifle — not without some uneasiness. When I fired I gritted my teeth fiercely, but it was with the same lack of

success. Unwilling to admit another failure, and in order to show what a good hunter I was, I announced that I was going to kill some pigeons too, besides the sparrows.

'That is much harder,' Valentina said.

'One pigeon is as good as forty sparrows.'

I found the largest shot I could, wrapped it in chewed-up paper, pumped the rifle until it was fully charged, and hardly had to wait at all — perhaps the pigeons had decided that we were harmless.

'Those are the ones papa likes best,' said Valentina, pointing to one with an iridescent breast and red feet.

'Let's begin, then.'

I fired, and the pigeon gave a jump, tried to fly, and fell with one wing spread out and its beak wide open. I went out for it and found that it had a broken wing; its beak opened and shut slowly in time with its heart beats. I brought it back to the ambush and threw it down as a trophy, closed the sacking again, and got my rifle ready once more. I was radiant, and Valentina stammered excitedly:

'Now another. Bang! And another. Bang! And another.'

'What shall we do with them?' I wondered, seeing that we now had six.

'We'll take them to the kitchen.'

The day was one which foretold the coming of spring. The sun had been shining directly into the garden, and the air was almost warm. One of the crickets began to chirp; then two or three others timidly followed its example. Valentina and I came down the stairs of the *solana* loaded with dead pigeons and started toward the kitchen. Doña Julia saw us enter the house; her first question was, 'Where did you get those?' From the impatient way in which she spoke I knew at once that we should find stormy weather ahead. We tried vainly to think of an excuse, and, just as Valentina was saying that we had found them in the street, Don Arturo came in through the garden gate. When he saw us he came straight to me:

‘Those are the pouters I bought in Zaragoza for breeding. What happened?’

He picked up two of them by their bloodstained wings. No one answered. We looked at one another, and I felt a strange sensation, as if my ears were growing larger.

‘I want to know what happened!’

The only answer came from the cricket in the garden, now clearly accompanied by two others. Don Arturo waved the incriminating evidence in the air and said:

‘I made nests for them myself, and they had just begun to lay! Fifty pesetas they cost me! Ten a pair!’

No one answered. There were ten crickets chirping now instead of three. Don Arturo looked out the window angrily:

‘What is going on out there?’

Doña Julia came over to me, pacifically:

‘Tell me what happened. Just tell *me*, Pepe.’

‘We found them in the street.’

Don Arturo took my rifle and removed the loading tube. I had fired it over thirty times, and it was hot.

‘In the street, did you?’

His round head turned red. The blush began on the crown, which was bald, and spread down toward his nose. He shook his fist at me, which I thought was going too far, and, turning to the window again, exclaimed through the chirping of thirty or forty crickets:

‘Do I hear that, or is something the matter with my ears?’

The well-fed crickets chirped with all their strength. Doña Julia put her head out the window too, not knowing what to think.

‘Heavens!’ she said. ‘The plague has broken loose!’

Valentina, seeing that her father and mother were not watching her for a moment, gave me her hand.

‘You killed them yourself. Admit it.’

Don Arturo waved the two pigeons before my face. I gathered up my courage and answered:

‘They’ll be very good with rice.’

'Did you hear him, Doña Julia? Did you hear what he said?'

Doña Julia left the window and addressed me:

'What did you say?'

Valentina, in an access of heroism, spoke:

'He said what is perfectly true. That they'll be very good with rice.'

'Be quiet, stupid!' her father interrupted.

Doña Julia knelt down beside me and took one of my hands in hers:

'Come, come, Pepe! You are in our house, you are our guest . . . What did you say?'

Valentina broke in again, repeating what I had said.

Don Arturo directed himself to me. He spoke, and his spittle showered on his wife's face and mine:

'Say that again, if you dare!'

I did not answer. Then, as Don Arturo continued to provoke me and I began to feel that I was being made ridiculous before Valentina, I repeated what I had said, and added:

'And if you won't let me stay here, I have a house of my own that's bigger than yours and a father who isn't like you and hasn't—'

'What do you say I have?' .

I realized that I was going too far and said nothing. But I looked so hard at his stomach — a truly monstrous stomach — that Doña Julia wanted to laugh.

'What were you going to say?' insisted Don Arturo.

'Nothing.'

'Tell me, Pepito,' insisted Doña Julia.

'No, he won't tell. Criminal instincts go with lying and deceit. And do you know, you good-for-nothing, what every one of those pigeons would cost me if I had them cooked with rice?'

The crickets were no longer three, or even thirty, but a multitude, and their voices shattered the afternoon stillness, penetrated the house to its farthest corner, and forced Don Arturo to raise his voice:

'Three pesetas for every wing,' and, rushing toward the garden — this time not to the window but to the door — he shouted like a madman:

'Who is responsible for this racket in my house? Or is there something the matter with my ears?'

Doña Julia, to calm him, assured him that there was nothing the matter with his ears because she could hear the noise too.

I went to the kitchen door and threw in my one remaining pigeon. Valentina did likewise with hers; I took her hand and started into the garden.

'Where are you going?'

Don Arturo clutched at my sweetheart's dress and pulled so hard that she almost fell backwards on to the ground. Not feeling at all sure what the outcome would be, I said:

'He feels safe enough with her; with a defenceless little girl!'

Don Arturo danced round the room, waving his arms and calling to his wife to make him an infusion with a dash of cognac. I thought that he was coming after me to catch me, but I would not walk any faster. I went slowly away, and when I reached the doorway I saw that Don Arturo had gone out on the *solana* and was kicking my ambush to pieces.

'Do you need any more proof, Julia?'

Between the *solana* and the dining-room there were more than sixty crickets chirping in unison. I set out for home, but the farther I got from the problem of the pigeons the nearer I was to the problem of my father. I shortened my strides, wanting to arrive as late as possible. I realized that it would have been best for me to wait until everyone had gone to bed, or at least until all the children had, because the things that troubled me most in my conflicts at home were Luisa's pity, Concha's worry, and, most of all, Maruja's perfidy. Realizing that if I stayed out until the 'grown-ups' supper time' things would be even worse, I entered the house. For the first time in a case of this kind I went to my mother. She was very glad to see me:

‘So, my son, you have realized that this is your home?’

Bah! My mother was always saying stupid things. I turned my back on her and went to my room, but long before I had got there I realized that she was following me. I went to the storeroom to see if the window was still nailed up, but the thought that my mother would follow me there too, and see the damaged mattresses, made me turn back. I went into my room, and my mother entered and shut the door.

‘Are you going to study?’

I suddenly showed a tremendous eagerness to study, then I shrugged my shoulders:

‘I haven’t any books.’

They were still at Don Arturo’s. It was dark, and my mother would not want to send a maid for them. I thought I was perfectly safe. But half an hour later all my books were brought to the house by Don Arturo’s gardener. It was his revenge.

V

I LOCKED myself in my room and thought, ‘One conflict at Don Arturo’s and another here’. I began to feel depressed, but a voice spoke inside me: ‘Am I not the lord of love, of wisdom, and of power?’ However, the same voice told me afterwards that it was not enough for me to believe it but that others must accept it too.

For the moment I decided to study.

To open a book was an act of heroism in itself. No one cared whether the subjects of which my books treated really interested me or not. In the first place, the authors of the books had shovelled their knowledge into them perhaps with no other intention than that of demonstrating that they could compose a really difficult text. Feeling rather inattentive, I

took a long time learning my geography, the rivers of India, and my geometry, the first lesson in the second part, on solid geometry. Latin I didn't bother with.

My thoughts wandered away to my exploits of the afternoon; I wondered what would happen to Valentina, and revived my anger against Don Arturo. I studied at a small table, which was covered with a parti-coloured cloth made from a piece of carpeting. The lamp was an old oil lamp re-modelled for electricity. The cord ran through the aperture where the wick had been; the narrow, hollow base that had held the oil, and the wide porcelain shade, slightly tinged with blue, remained as they had been. The shade reflected the light on to the table in a wide nimbus. And where the nimbus ended, the darkness of the room, which so frightened Concha, began. But at the meeting place of these two mysteries, in the zone where light and shadow were parted, there was a yellowish halo in which the colours of the velvety table cover became brighter. Curious things were to be seen there: state coaches with footmen in gloves, garlands of flowers, dancing dwarfs, giants sleeping, or fallen, or possibly dead. Some of these things were so minute in proportions, so small and so distant, that, without realizing what I was doing, I took my field glasses and began examining them with their aid. Most of the illusions remained. Some vanished, but the glasses revealed in their stead an even smaller world. Between the thick knots of the warp and woof, which looked like hills and mountains, there was a whole flora. Grasses, shrubs, trees. The grass was sometimes blue or red, the trees mauve. I could make each shadow into a whole creature by imagining arms and legs for it, and bring it to life by endowing it with a purpose. When I grew tired of my game I sighed mournfully and returned to my books. I should have liked to be sitting there beside one of those red hills under a mauve tree, waiting for Valentina. And for her to arrive, freed from parents and tiresome pianos, those instruments of torture as black as

coffins. I should find a river there where we could drink when we were thirsty, and honey from the hive, and apples.

And quite soon, I think, I saw myself there too. And Valentina's cousin came up, announcing:

'I am the son of a nefarious politician.'

But I walked away with Valentina and, with our arms around each other's waists, we repeated the Words of the Enamoured Soul. I remember that, imagining myself with my book of devotions open, I read the italic letters in the shadow of those little red trees as if I were actually reading from the book. I was the lord of love and power. The doctor had already said that I was a hero. But . . . lord of wisdom? I doubted that. I began storing new verses of my song for Valentina in my memory:

All by the shore of the fish-pond
Bend down, your face to see.
It will be you, it will not be you,
And a fish in every tree!

'Twas you, 'twas you
That made the reeds so bold.
I knew, I knew,
Because you shook with cold.

But I had to return to the rivers of India. They were not as large as I had thought. The largest river seemed to be the Ganges. It was the longest, if the figures in my text did not lie. I should have liked the Ebro to have been the longest, and I felt disillusioned and wounded in my patriotism. I finished my lessons — I never learned them thoroughly, but they were at least sketched in my mind and the next day I would go over them and make more sure — and then I had time left for the 'Universiad'. I had to begin it all over again. I went to the library for paper, first taking my duplicate key from behind the picture in my room. I slipped downstairs like a thief and had put the key in the lock and was just

beginning to open the door, when I saw that there was a light inside. I was afraid my father was there, so I took the key out and returned cautiously to my room. I had already reached the top of the stairs when I heard someone open the door and, after making sure that there was no one in the hall, close it again.

I sat down at my table and gave myself up to my landscapes once more. I could see little people on the cloth in the zone between the lamplight and the darkness. And in those miniature landscapes I now saw Valentina clearly. She was dressed in her Sunday dress, the same one she had worn to Mass at the convent. With my field glasses I could even see her yellow rosary wound around her wrist. Some of the figures in my landscapes jumped like fleas, but she remained still and looked at me. 'To those beings, except for Valentina,' I said, 'I must be a kind of God.' I opened one of my books at the blank pages at the end and began writing down all the things I could see: a rivulet, two trees, a tiny wagon loaded with grass and wildflowers. A bird. And another. All the birds were sitting still on the ground. One of them seemed to be a peacock with its tail folded, or perhaps a pheasant. And Valentina came walking among them — I could see her perfectly through the field glasses — and waving her bare arms she said: 'Papa beat me. Now that it is papa who beat me, you can kill him.' And a smile came over her dark face, as it always did when she spoke. I promised her I would, and asked her what she thought of my latest exploits. She answered only by saying that 'one pigeon is as good as forty sparrows', with which I felt perfectly satisfied. Meanwhile I was looking for her father through the miniature landscapes on my table, and I could not find him. I was aware of a delightful feeling of leisure. It had been only a short time since I had begun 'at supper with the grown-ups'. Until then I had had supper with all my brothers and sisters — except Concha, who was twelve — at nightfall at seven o'clock. By eight I was already in bed. It must be half-past

eight by now, and I had not had supper even yet because now I 'had supper with the grown-ups'. The younger children were in bed. I fell asleep, and woke with a start when someone came to look for me.

Luckily, my father was too preoccupied by his private worries to want to inquire into the facts:

'Oh — so you're back, are you?'

My studies began to go better. Since I could no longer go out on the roof and it was impossible for me to study in my room in the day-time, on sunny days I went out to the second yard, where the geese and the pigeons lived, and climbed the tiled roof of a shed to a point about half-way up the kitchen wall. I could not see Valentina's house from there, but with the cats and the sparrows I persuaded myself that the scene was much the same as the one from the other roof. The absence of a chimney, however, made it decidedly inconvenient. There I studied, thinking of Valentina. I had told my elder sister all that had happened, and she promised to find out for me what my beloved's fate had been.

On the other side of the wall opposite, which ran between the poultry yard and stable of the next house, there was a narrow hanging terrace where clothes were dried. There was something very interesting on this terrace. It was Carrasco. We were the same age and next-door neighbours, but we had never spoken to each other. Yet we could not see each other without instantly plunging into desperate combat. When Carrasco saw me he bit the knuckle of his first finger, showed his teeth, wrinkled up his nose, and emitted a series of low snarls. I heard the snarls and thus knew where he was. And almost before I had seen him I flew at him like lightning. The neighbours sometimes separated us before we had come to blows, and sometimes, seeing that we were about to meet, one would hold me and another would hold him until we had passed by each other. I had forgotten him because we had not had a fight for five or six months. But when he saw that I had discovered him from my roof he began to bite his knuckles

and snarl. The wall was thirty feet high. He couldn't come down and I couldn't go up. He threatened me with a catapult; I replied with my empty pistol, which filled him with admiration; then, without exchanging a word, he put his catapult away, I put my pistol away, and I went back to my geography.

The afternoon sun coloured part of the opposite wall. The pigeons flocked to the roof on which I was sitting and surrounded me. As I did not offer them anything to eat, they did not perch on my body but they fluttered about and came to rest within reach of my hands. Then, seeing that I had nothing for them, they went away.

I was studying the mountains of Russia without interest. The only mountain that interested me was 'Roland's Leap', which I could see from my room. So I looked at the opposite wall, where three lizards with heaving flanks were warming themselves in the sun. I had never seen anything prettier and more delicate than a lizard's head. The timorous eyes, the little nostrils the colour of baked clay, the fine mouth which was always shut and ended in such a well-modelled snout, enchanted me. Carrasco's snarling aroused me from my abstraction. I looked up. The low fellow was looking at the wall, trying to measure its height.

'Come on down!' I said, laughing. 'Come on down! I'm waiting for you.'

'I have your grave all dug for you.'

It was probably the first time that we had spoken to each other in our lives.

'Come on down!' I insisted.

He seemed to be quite willing.

If there had been straw or hay below, as there sometimes was, he would have come.

'I have your grave all dug for you,' he repeated.

I pulled out my pistol and aimed at him:

'Get out of here before I count ten.'

I began counting aloud. When I reached 'eight' he dis-

appeared. I was sure that he had gone into the street to wait for me. In times past he had sometimes waited for me a whole morning. His dream was to triumph over me, but I knew his tricks and, except for the first time when he took me by surprise and succeeded in knocking me down and straddling me so that I couldn't get away (even then he could not claim a victory because I hit him in the nose and he went home dripping blood), our battles had ended either indecisively or in my favour. I knew of no concrete cause of his hatred for me, but later in life I learned that such hatreds are the most envenomed.

It was hot that afternoon, with the silent heat that falls on villages, when the pigeons seek the shade and time seems to halt and grow deep with a thousand small sounds. I was sweating and I left my lookout, considering my lessons learned. Just then I heard a voice calling my name from a window:

'Pepe!'

It was Concha, and there was no need to ask why she had called me. Valentina was in the house.

When Doña Julia came to our house in a hat and gloves my mother received her in the drawing-room. If she came 'just passing by' without her gloves and hat, they stayed where they were and Doña Julia helped my mother to put away linens or take them out—the two ritual labours of the home. If my mother went to Doña Julia's house in a hat and gloves she was likewise received in the drawing-room. When one of them, on leaving, announced that 'this visit didn't count', it meant that the other was not obliged to return it. These things were the manifestation of a perfectly serious formality. It entailed no other obligations. As for my father and Don Arturo, they saw each other at the club.

This time Doña Julia had come in gloves and a hat. Valentina was 'paying a call' too, and etiquette required three details: white socks with white garters, black patent-leather shoes with white buckles, and the green and white flowers in

her hair. The drawing-room was a large, old-fashioned room surrounded by phantasmal armchairs swathed in white covers. There were family portraits on the walls, among them one which I prized highly, although my father often joked about it, or perhaps for that very reason: the portrait of 'your uncle the Colonel'. The other portraits were uninteresting. My parents in their wedding clothes, we children dressed for our first communion. There were also three or four darkened oil paintings, of which my father used to say, 'The frames are very good'.

What interested Valentina and me was a glazed cabinet containing marble figurines, fans of painted silk and feathers, wedding presents, and two Manila shawls full of birds-of-paradise and strange flowers embroidered in soft yellows and greens on a white background. I told Valentina that I would give her all the things in the cabinet when we married.

'What about your sisters?'

We looked at these things while our mothers exchanged compliments, and little by little stole toward the door. Doña Julia saw what was happening and threw out brief warnings which consisted only of her daughter's name:

'Valentina!'

Valentina, as though she had been caught committing a crime, approached the centre of the drawing-room, and soon after we began edging away again. At our third attempt her mother called her to her side, took her hand, and made her sit down on the carpet. I came slowly over and sat down too. Before I entered the drawing-room I had to scrub my knees thoroughly, it was the most arduous part of my toilet, and put on my green velveteen suit.

Doña Julia, extremely polite and proper, told my mother that her garden had undergone a veritable invasion of crickets and that on these warm nights they began chirping at twilight and did not stop till morning. No one could sleep. But it was obvious that they wanted to talk about me, and my mother asked me from time to time:

'Pepe, haven't you anything to do? Shouldn't you be studying?'

I said that I had finished my lessons already and asked Valentina to come out with me. Her mother refused for her. So I sat down beside her again, intending to keep them from talking.

'I wish,' Valentina said, 'that it were Sunday again.'

We exchanged the sheets of paper which we had hidden to give each other. Valentina's mother, who was watching our every movement, put her hand out and took her daughter's sheet.

'What is this?' said my mother, smiling.

It was nothing less than three lines from a sonnet by Baudelaire. Valentina had found it in a review to which her father, who was fond of literature, subscribed:

Permit my heart, intoxicate with spring,
To plunge into your eyes as in a dream
And sleep beneath the shadow of your lashes.

It was the most beautiful thing Valentina had sent me. For my part, I was continuing with Bécquer. Her mother took it too and read it to herself:

When they had told me, in my very heart
I felt the strength of steel and felt its chill.
And then I knew wherefore it is men weep,
And then I knew wherefore it is men kill.

There was more of the poem, and I had altered it so that what 'they told me' was not that she had been unfaithful but that her father had beaten her. Doña Julia decided to be severe. We were both ordered to leave the room, and we went away feeling very pleased. And then our mothers began to talk about us.

I took Valentina to my room, closed the shutters, turned on the light, shook the tablecloth to rearrange the lights and

colours, and began to show her where I had seen her, how she had raised her arms and said her father had beaten her, and so on. I invited her to look through my field glasses; and so we spent a long time. Then I showed her my arsenal, and my 'ammunition dump', an old tin powder-box of my father's into which I put small quantities of gunpowder which I stole from his new ones.

'In less than a month,' I said, 'I'll have enough powder to blow up your house.'

Valentina looked at me doubtfully:

'No. They're disgusted enough already about the crickets. I tell you,' she insisted, 'that they really are nice, but they're awfully disgusted.'

'All right,' I said. 'But I may have to do it.'

We went to the first yard and then to the second. Aunt Ignacia was there, giving the ducks and geese and pigeons and goats their supper.

The next thing I saw — after Aunt Ignacia — was Carrasco on the top of the wall. He bit his knuckle and snarled. When I began to point my pistol at him he said in a terribly grown-up voice:

'Colaso's son is here and wants to talk to you.'

As if that were not enough, he added:

'I don't want to fight any more, I don't,
And if you are willing — why, let's be friends.
I don't want to fight any more, I don't,
And if you are willing — why, let's be friends.'

When he thought that he had chanted it often enough, he said, in his speaking voice, that Colaso was outside the door of my house, waiting to talk to me about something very interesting. I asked Valentina if she would like to come with me and find out what he wanted. With my arm around her shoulder and skipping every three steps we made our way to the court. We did not have to go through the house. There was a passageway which ran beside the oil and wine presses. León

started growling again when he saw us, but soon stopped.

I found Colaso where Carrasco had said he would be. He was the leader of the other gang, though of all my enemies he was the only one who said that I was worth something and that it would be better to persuade me to join his gang than to attack me. The difficulty was that if I joined his gang, bringing with me my entire arsenal, I could demand to be made leader, and this the present leaders would not tolerate. I turned to Valentina:

‘Wait here a minute and watch everything that happens.’

I went out of the door and walked up to Colaso, looking as unfriendly as possible:

‘Here I am.’

‘People who are always fighting don’t amount to much,’ he said, sententiously.

‘I’m not always fighting.’

‘I don’t mean you.’

The matter which had brought him to see me was a really serious one. His gang went to the bank of the river every day to challenge the boys of the adjoining town. They carried hemp slings and a good supply of stones of the proper size. The boys across the river were not less well equipped. And the struggle began. The last few days the battle ended in favour of my townsmen, but when the enemy had suffered more than three casualties (boys who had been hit in the head and ran home dripping blood) their fathers came out with rifles, embarked in boats, and rowed out to a good shooting distance. Colaso’s slingers attacked them and probably made a few hits, but when the fathers reached the middle of the river they aimed their rifles, which they had loaded with kitchen salt, and gave us a scorching. Every boy’s calves were scarred by the grains of salt which ‘got under the skin and burned terribly’. While our wounded danced up and down, smarting, the boys from the enemy town laughed and made fun of them. And this had been repeated for three successive days and was not to be borne. They wanted my advice, but

the best thing would be if I would join them. There was to be no battle that evening.

'Why not?' I asked.

'Because if you don't come with your reinforcements, it's useless.'

'What kind of reinforcements?'

'Why, reinforcements enough so that we of this town won't go down as cowards.'

'My gang?'

'That would be the best thing. Your gang, and you with your arms.'

They all knew that I had daggers and pistols. I accepted, and made an appointment with them for the next day.

Colaso went off. National unity had been sealed. Anyone who had been told that Carrasco was going to fight at my side would have thought that he was being made the victim of a joke. I returned to Valentina and said:

'My enemies have come. Colaso and Carrasco and all of them. It is clear that they have come because they need me.'

'What for?'

'For a battle that we are going to fight to-morrow.'

Valentina felt uncertain, as usual:

'Mightn't you be killed?'

'Me?'

'It's because I saw Colaso doing like this, as if he were aiming a rifle.'

'But they only shoot salt.'

I intended to load my two pistols with gunpowder and good wolf-ball.

'I'll go too,' she said.

'Who ever heard of women going to war?'

'They go to look after the wounded.'

Valentina looking after my wounds seemed to me a beautiful idea, but I did not give her permission. Besides, after what had taken place at her house she would find it very hard to slip away.

We went up to the dining-room, where our two mothers and Concha were having chocolate. My new plans made me absent-minded, and Concha and my mother noticed it at once. My mother asked, wonderingly:

‘Where have you two been?’

And added, with her usual lack of tact:

‘Always in corners, always hiding in corners.’

Valentina threw her arms around her mother’s neck and explained to her that she had to marry me. Her mother was offended:

‘Very well. And you don’t want to marry me?’

This was a new problem. Valentina solved it very cleverly:

‘No. Because I have to marry a man. You and papa. Pepe and I. And everyone else.’

‘But why?’

‘Because that is how life is.’

I affected a masculine contempt for this female chattering. I was annoyed when Valentina embraced her mother, because her embraces belonged to me.

• ‘You’ll have a very untactful husband.’

Valentina turned to me:

‘She says you will be very un-tact-ful.’

It was a new word to her and she had to pronounce it carefully. Valentina’s mother explained:

‘It is very untactful when you try to win your father-in-law’s admiration by killing his pigeons.’

I looked at Valentina. Had she betrayed me? Had she confessed everything? I looked at her in a way which admitted of no doubt, and she answered me by putting out her tongue, winking charmingly, and shaking her head in a decided ‘no’. She and I, face to face, were stronger than our elders. And besides, I was thinking of the next day’s adventure with such pride that I could regard everything else with benevolence.

‘I?’

‘Yes, you, Pepe. Now you’ll be angry with me because I have just told your mother all about it.’

'Doña Julia, I don't understand. And you needn't worry, because I shan't be angry with you.'

In truth I could never regard Valentina's mother or my own as real enemies.

I wanted to take Valentina on to the gallery, but her mother would not let her go:

'No. She is going to stay with me now. When you are married you can have her with you all the time.'

Concha served chocolate and brought in some pastries. I kissed Valentina good-bye and was leaving the room when her mother asked me if I hated her too much to kiss her too. I returned and kissed her hand. I did not like to kiss her face because there was always powder on it.

I went and prepared my equipment.

My father had gone to the country again, to the estate of the landlord who was involved in the same difficulties as he. For the moment I had a clear field. I went to the library, where he kept his shooting material. I soon found three canteen-shaped tin boxes full of powder. And other boxes full of cartridges made of some transparent material through which the charge was visible. And still another with lead ball for wolves and wild boar. I took two in each hand and went to my room. There I found that the ball fitted my pistol barrel loosely. There was room to spare. I decided to do as I did when I loaded my air rifle, that is, to make the projectile fit the barrel by means of chewed paper. And seeing that I had all the things I needed, I hid them behind the picture and began to walk up and down. I opened the window and looked out, calculating the distance between it and the roof; then, sure that I could not cross it but unwilling to resign myself, I went into the storeroom and found to my surprise that the window there was open. It seems that my mother had had it unnailed in order to ventilate the part of the storeroom intended for jars of jam and preserves. With my field glasses slung across my shoulder, I went out on to the roof and settled down against the chimney. The sun was beginning to set; I

could hear a cricket far away, I remembered the ones we had left in Don Arturo's garden. I began to look around. There was not a cat in sight, but the birds were returning to their shelters to sleep, chattering as they always did. A number of sparrows approached the holes which the supporting beams left here and there in the wall and were noisily expelled by other birds, who came out furiously to defend their homes. Twilight fell in an impressive silence. Everything was sweet and yellow like honey. Behind the nuns' tower the sky filled with clouds. Valentina was going home, and I imagined her walking modestly along beside her mother but thinking of me. Then there happened what always happens to me when I have a pleasurable feeling of myself. Distances vanished, the past too dissolved in a confused cloud, and nothing but the present remained. Yet out of this delicious moment strong roots reached down into the depths of my being, and something rose from it too, like branches and flowers into the air. I felt stronger and at the same time dehumanized, like a stone or a beam. Watching the sunset, I saw the opposite of what I had seen in my tablecloth under the lamplight. In that sunset, which surrounded me like an immense glass bell, I saw the same fantasies, but monstrously enlarged. The same light that poured down on my roof, on the chimney, and on the wall where the birds were chattering, entered my eyes like a torrent. Beyond the nuns' tower the clouds were the same white as the washing hung out to dry. Other clouds formed amber-coloured figures. Staring out, I began to see my dead grandmother's head with its white cap, in the bed where she always lay ill. I remembered too how the poor creature used to say:

'O Lord, let this cup pass from me!'

Then I saw Valentina too. Not her face nor even her legs, but the whole of my Valentina was made of the substance of those lights and of that crystal anguish of the sky into which I felt myself falling.

I had my field glasses, and I focused, just as I had on my

tablecloth, on the distant clouds. The impression did not increase, but the glasses isolated the sunset and excluded the sights immediately around me. I should have liked to escape into those regions where all words die, where all desires are enriched in silence, and I came to believe that perhaps I could arrive there through the black tube of my field glasses. When I heard the convent bell, which rang just then for prayers, I dropped the field glasses into my lap and spoke with closed eyes:

'O God, I too am the lord of love and power, and one day,' I said modestly, 'I shall be the lord of wisdom. But Thou who canst do all things, make Valentina's father die and mine too, and make our families very poor, and let Valentina and me walk the roads for ever. Amen.'

After that I found I had one fire-cracker left, and I threw it down the chimney, this time quite sure that it was the kitchen chimney. I waited and listened and, hearing nothing, went downstairs to see what had happened. The fire was out, and Maruja was studying her catechism two steps from the place where my fire-cracker had fallen. Alas! I picked it up and, opening my mouth and pulling the corners of it back almost to my ears with my fingers, I stepped quietly up to my sister. She flung down her book and ran to the door:

'Mamma!'

'Mamma, mamma! Always mamma!'

I started to slip up to my room again, but suddenly remembered that there was something I still had to find out and went to the 'corraliza'. And indeed I had no sooner arrived than I heard Carrasco's voice from the top of the dividing wall:

'Three o'clock to-morrow at the little ford.'

The nearness of the battle made me more reasonable. I will not deny that in the midst of my grandiose plans I suddenly remembered the rifles that our enemies' fathers loaded with nothing but salt, it is true, but the salt crystals were sometimes as big as bird shot, and they penetrated the calves. But

I would never succumb as Carrasco and Colaso had succumbed. All we boys knew that a wound from salt caused such an itching that dancing up and down, at least for the first minute or two, was unavoidable. It was useless to scratch — indeed, it made matters worse. The best thing was to dance, and, in any case, it appeared that the dancing was unavoidable. This was the real calamity of the last few days; this was why the boys all felt so ashamed. I looked through my wardrobe for a pair of heavy socks which were long and turned over at the top, but which, if I wore them in battle with the tops pulled up, would protect my legs completely. Would they be a sufficient defence? I had an inspiration, ran down to the kitchen, and returned with a handful of salt, with which I loaded the tube of my rifle. I hung the socks on the foot of my bed and fired. Salt penetrated between the threads of the weave.

‘All right, but I fired from too near. From a distance the salt can hardly have that much force.’

But in any case, my plan was not to let them fire. To surprise them before they reached the middle of the river. I had to think it all over very slowly, as real soldiers think.

I clicked my tongue, shook my head, and, hearing supper announced, slid downstairs on the banister. Before I dismounted I called down the stairway to León. I heard his tail wag against the ground.

I was so impatient for the glories that awaited me that I could not sit still at supper and that night I hardly slept at all.

VI

I WOKE very early. The battle was in the afternoon. It was a sunny day. I slipped off to the scene dressed in the oldest trousers I could find and a knitted jersey worn through at the elbows. In my belt underneath the jersey, which came down over it, I carried two pistols loaded with powder, shot, and

tight-fitting wads of paper. In one of my trousers pockets, a fuse of the kind peasants use to light their cigars; in the other, an innocent box of wax matches which I found in the kitchen. To all appearances I was the most inoffensive being in the world, and I smiled ironically when people passed me and said paternally:

‘God keep you, Pepe.’

When I reached the ford they were all ranged in battle array, awaiting me. Three or four boys were sharpening their teeth with a file that belonged to the apothecary’s son. It was one of our customs to do this before a regular battle so that we could bite more fiercely; and to-day, in view of the possibility that the enemy would come ashore or we succeed in crossing the river and engaging him hand to hand, the file was passed from one to another and I could hear it rasping against the boys’ incisors.

Cólaso came forward as the delegate of the allied gang. The troops were such veteran warriors that some of the boys who had been wounded on the previous days had succeeded in escaping from their homes and had reappeared at the post of duty. They faced not only the risks of battle but later unpleasant consequences behind the lines. Across the river two boats bobbed up and down; they were moored to the rocky shore, and their oars were aboard. Carrasco invited me to review the troops. I silently admitted that they knew more than I did, for I had not supposed that troops had to be reviewed before a battle. But a whistle sounded across the river, and out of the streets at the edge of the enemy town, which was visible about three hundred yards from the river, poured a howling multitude of small boys. It was impossible to make out what they were shouting, but they were certainly repeating the extremely dirty and offensive refrain which they had dedicated to my townsmen. Naturally, our boys wanted to shout too and pay them back in the same sort of coin, but I stationed myself ten yards ahead of the front line, turned my back on the enemy and cried:

‘Silence!’

Carrasco, Colaso, the apothecary’s son, and the son of the woman who kept the tobacco shop stepped forward and informed me that they were the leaders.

‘If you are leaders,’ I said, ‘where are your arms?’

‘Do you mean you don’t want us for leaders?’

The enemy were yelling louder than before, and the first stones struck.

‘Get your slings ready!’

‘All ready!’ came voices from here and there.

As the stones were falling like hail, I said angrily:

‘Break the troop up into guerrilla parties. Can’t you see that we’re too close together?’

Before the other leaders had repeated the order the troop had carried it out.

‘You may fire when ready!’

The gang which was usually against me was composed of more veteran fighters than my own followers. Carrasco bit the first finger of his left hand and grunted, while he whirled his sling with his right hand and raised his left foot to put the strength of his whole body behind his missile.

‘This looks like a real war,’ I heard several boys say in satisfied tones.

We were better slingers; it could be seen from the way our stones skimmed across the river without rising. If a stone thus slung struck an enemy in the head he fell down unconscious. We had made the experiment many times, and it was our countersign and our military advantage. The enemy, you might say, fired at an elevation.

The apothecary’s son was hit in the ankle and fell to the ground cursing like a real soldier. He called out to me:

‘Get out your pistols now.’

But I could not sacrifice victory to please the apothecary’s son. Our enemies had stopped shouting on the principle that you cannot both ring the bells and march in the procession, and they were now giving all their energies to the combat.

Carrasco, still biting his finger, had already knocked down two of them and was raging up and down like a devil, waving his empty sling in the air and yelling:

‘There are two that confession can’t help any more!’

The others imitated him and made skimming shots. Carrasco called out instructions to a boy who was putting too big a stone in his sling. He said that small stones were better because they flew faster and the victim could not see them coming. That was his method, and he demonstrated it, whirling his loaded sling in the air, biting his finger, and raising his left foot.

The leather of the sling cracked:

‘A rebound is worse than a direct hit. It will knock anything down. I’d rather be hit by ten straight shots than by one rebound.’

We attacked with fury. One of the two enemy wounded got up with his head smeared with blood, the other lay motionless on the ground. They were less intelligent than we, and they gathered into groups which it was easy to hit.

Colaso came up, uneasy:

‘We’ve wounded two of them already; it won’t be long before they bring on their rifles.’

‘Let’s make it twenty before the rifles get here.’

The battle continued, and at the end of two hours the famous reserve of rifles had not appeared. The enemy casualties had not reached twenty, but they were not far from it. On our side the wounded were the apothecary’s son, who limped but was still firing; Carrasco, who had received a glancing blow on the head; and a small boy, the son of the barber, who had been hit in the right forearm and who, when I asked him why he had stopped firing, held out his arm to me, fractured — it swung in either direction like a broken reed. Gritting his teeth with pain, he said:

‘Take my sling if you want it because I don’t know what’s happened to my arm. It bends both ways. Take it,’ he insisted, ‘it has a sweet tooth.’

He meant to say that it was gluttonous, that is, that stones it threw always hit someone in the head. The others continued to fire without incident. I had my back to the enemy when my troops warned me:

'Here it comes, here it comes!'

I thought that they referred to a stone which was coming my way, but the gestures of some of my followers who were preparing for flight told me that the moment had arrived. I turned to face the river; there were the two boats full of peasants and bristling with rifles. They seemed to be looking at us in astonishment and exclaiming:

'There are more of them every day!'

The peasants were surprised to see how calm we were. I took out my two pistols. I was sorry at once, because I needed two hands to fire, and I put one pistol back in my belt. I lighted the fuse with a wax match, and with a pistol in one hand and the fuse in the other I waited.

'Fire on the boats!'

The stones from our slings skimmed over the water. We heard them clatter against the wooden sides of the boats. Two or three stones found their mark, and we clearly heard groans and the voices of adults. The first boat fired two rifles at us. The report was so loud that I felt myself weaken. Some of our boys started running, but I commanded:

'Keep your places! Everybody down on the ground, and protect your heads with your arms.'

Most of them obeyed. I had pulled up my socks, so that the tops covered even my knees. The apothecary's son, who was unlucky that day, was hit by a few grains of salt and danced the inevitable dance, which was even more grotesque than usual because of his injured ankle.

With all the power my lungs could muster, which was not much, I shouted:

'Fall back. Everyone, fall back! Or you'll all be killed!'

Another burst from the rifles answered me. Promptly disregarding the itching of my legs, I applied the fuse to my

pistol. I fumbled for a moment without being able to ignite the powder, and then I do not know what happened, but the pistol flew out of my hands with a report much louder than the rifles had made. The boats stopped. The silence after I had fired was so great that I could hear Carrasco scratching his head.

'Watch out, they're firing bullets!' someone in the boats said.

Our side rose, reanimated, and sent off a hail of stones.

'Watch out, they're firing ball — I heard it go by,' we heard someone say in the first boat, which, instead of coming on, began to turn to one side, perhaps preparing to retreat.

I was amazed that there were no dead and no wrecked boats. But I still had another pistol. The second time, I fired with my eyes shut. The report was even louder, and the men in the boats, who were already falling back before our hail of stones, turned round and rowed as fast as they could for the farther shore. Amidst their shouts we heard the words 'mayor' and 'police'. It appears that some of them had heard my ball whizz by their ears. The boys of the enemy town, when they heard my shots, took to disgraceful flight. Left masters of the field, we cheered loudly and decided to withdraw in proper formation. Long before we had entered the town, an incomprehensible terror had seized that handful of heroes. Some feared their mothers' slippers, others the room where rats were, the majority that they would be deprived of supper. We parted, thoroughly satisfied with our exploit and resolved to maintain the sacred union of the two gangs; 'each for all and all for each', we affirmed, and reminded each other that the principal part of our alliance was keeping our secret from those ignoble and stupid beings, our elders. Colaso embraced me and said that they would make me their general. The apothecary's son, thinking that colonel was a higher rank, added:

'And colonel after the next battle.'

Carrasco bit his finger and said:

'I'm colonel and Pepe's admiral, because it was a naval battle.'

I did not dare to confess that I had lost my pistols. They had vanished, the devil knows where, when I fired.

'Was it a naval battle or not?' he insisted.

'Mixed. Land and naval, both.'

We parted, repeating our cautions in regard to secrecy. A precaution which turned out to be most useful, because the people of the other town protested to the authorities, and when the investigation began six of our boys were held — just as if they had been of age — and gave evidence for several days before a children's court which was constituted for the purpose in the municipality. I had to go too, but not as a presumptive delinquent like the others. At home I pretended to be surprised by the summons to testify and affected indifference, although really I felt that we had gone too far and that we might all end up in a reformatory. My father, still preoccupied by his difficulties with the bank, did not pay much attention, although he had given me to understand incidentally that if I were guilty he would do justice with his own hand — nothing short of cutting off the arm with which I had offended!

My testimony before the investigating commission consisted of denying everything that might point to me and defending my comrades. I said that, according to what I had heard, my friends had gone to the river to play and several inhabitants of the town on the other side had attacked them with rifles. The tribunal heard us attentively. It was composed of three peasants, one of whom was a member of the town council. I had heard my parents laugh about him, which gave me a certain amount of sang-froid.

'With rifles?'

'Yes, and in that case what could my friends do but defend themselves? So they defended themselves with slings until they were obliged to run away.'

'We all have scars on our legs,' said one.

The apothecary's son, whose wounds were still open, was examined, and when the tribunal was thoroughly occupied we said that of course they had fired only salt.

'Even so . . .,' said the councillor, shaking his head.

I was afraid they had learned of my shots, but they had not. The peasants from the other side of the river were checked by the consideration that it was undignified to enter into a boys' quarrel. The story of the salt, which no one had mentioned before (to such lengths did we carry our policy of not talking before adults), changed the course of the affair entirely. My comrades were set free, it being considered that they had been sufficiently punished by their three-day confinement in the grain-loft of the town hall; I went home; and the peasants from the neighbouring town were condemned by their mayor to a fine of two pesetas for firing — even though it was with salt — at human beings, and one of them who did not have a hunting licence had his rifle taken away and had to pay a fine of five pesetas. Our triumph was complete, but, after three days of real panic, I had become wary. (I had not been afraid of punishment, or even of prison, which would have been an adventurous consequence, and worthy of me; what I feared was the scandal at home and, above all, Don Arturo's satisfaction.)

Meanwhile, my situation among the boys was a really privileged one, and I felt it at every step. Carrasco appeared on top of the wall and saluted me, asking for orders and instructions. In the street, if I asked a boy for anything he had with him — a top, or a mat made of playing cards, or whatever it might be — he gave it to me at once. Even among the boys of the more distant quarters, with whom we never played, I had a certain authority. The news had gone round, and when I passed I often heard: 'That's Pepe, Pepe from the Plaza.' And they left their games to look at me. I considered that I had deserved all this — a naval victory in a place where there was no sea was something that did not happen every day — and sometimes I would go up to them,

patriarchal and magnanimous. I remember that one day a small boy in one of the more distant quarters had a bird in his hand. Since they were looking at me as if I were a superior being, I had to behave in accordance with their conception of me. I had to do what a superior being would do.

‘Give me that bird.’

The boy gave it to me, but it was obvious that he was sorry to part with it. I looked the bird over knowingly:

‘You haven’t clipped its wings?’

‘No.’

The bird was not hurt. Its heart beat strongly against my fingers. I raised my hand and opened it. The bird gave a surprised chirp and launched itself into the air with all its strength. Its joy and surprise were so great that they caused a repercussion in its stomach and, as it flew, we saw a thread of white matter fall through the air. The bird came to rest on the edge of a roof and turned and looked at us. It gave another happy chirp and flew away. The boy watched it, not far from tears. I took five centimes from my pocket and gave them to him:

‘Don’t go thinking I took it away from you,’ I said. ‘I don’t take things from people. I bought it from you with my own money.’

To small boys five centimes was a fortune. The youngster considered himself generously reimbursed and, still not quite believing in his good fortune, walked off, for fear I might change my mind. I told the boys who remained that they must not catch birds, because birds loved freedom more than anything.

‘I kill them sometimes, but that’s different. It’s all right to kill them, but not to catch them alive and make slaves of them.’

I thought these ideas were worthy of my prestige, but possibly I was sincere. I was not sincere in the price I paid for the bird, because giving five centimes for a bird — I, who could catch any number of them — seemed to me a piece of extravagance.

I continued to reap the fruits of my popularity, and it gave me such pleasure, such calm, and such self-confidence that I felt that now I really was the lord of power. Lord of love I had been for some time. Lord of power I even now was. I only needed to become the lord of wisdom. And I settled down to study, with the idea that I must raise myself to the stature which was mine.

I had not seen Valentina for a week. The poor child must be sitting at the piano with her scales and arpeggios. At home Maruja and Luisa had begun taking piano lessons too, and all day long you could hear their slow struggles from the direction of the gallery. Luisa did not like it, but Maruja boasted of it and talked about 'studying a lot', saying that I never studied anything, as if we were equals.

When Valentina was allowed to come, we met with all our accumulated desire to be together. She had learned what had happened at the river, because her father had talked of me scornfully, accusing me of terrible crimes, and she had asked the boys and they had told her. Valentina did not admire me any the more for it. I had raised her to a delirious plane long before; beyond it, it was impossible for her to go.

'I'll soon be leaving for Zaragoza,' I told her.

'What for?'

I answered as I had sometimes heard my elders answer:

'On business.'

Valentina added:

'For the examinations?'

'Yes, that too.'

'Will you send me a post card?'

'Yes. One every day.'

'Who are you going with?'

'With Mosén Joaquín, because he has business there too, and we happen to be going the same day.'

Mosén Joaquín was satisfied with me. He had tried to obtain a recital of the latest events from me, but, seeing that

I maintained my reserve, he did not insist. We were 'both studying', because Mosén Joaquín had had the intelligent idea of telling me that he had 'forgotten a good many things', and that 'the sciences, too, had advanced since he had studied them', and, in conclusion, that he ought to study every day at the same time as I did. It was a miraculous revelation. And now I found great pleasure in doing just what he was doing. He at his table in his study beside the flowery terrace, I on the roof, leaning against the chimney. Sometimes I even permitted myself to say to him in class:

'Mosén Joaquín, you are mistaken. You have that wrong.' And we would turn to the textbook and see that I was right. I think now that he must have done it on purpose.

Our friendship increased. One day he saw me walking through the Plaza of Santa Clara with Valentina. There was a merry-go-round in another square not far away, in the opposite direction from the convent, and I had invited her. When Mosén Joaquín, who was on the balcony of his terrace, saw us, he gave us a friendly smile and waved his hand.

I spent my money prodigally on the merry-go-round. We did not like the horses, and the pigs even less. After we had taken two rides on the horses we decided to sit in the back of a charming landau, close together. It happened that the music was the tune to which I had composed my poem, and I sang it. The second time, Valentina knew it:

'Come and play and sing,
All in the ring
Of cinnamon-bread.

'Twas you, 'twas you
That made the reeds so bold.
I knew, I knew,
Because you shook with cold.
For me, for me,
Valentina and Valenti.'

And I ended, with the last notes of the tune:

‘Dindle and dandle!
Here comes the notary,
Bringing his candle!’

The last lines pleased Valentina, very much.

Mosén Joaquín saw us returning, and waved to us again. The next day he said:

‘I should like to be the one to marry you on the day you finish your studies, eh?’

I promised him that no one but he should marry us.

‘That is, if you’re still alive,’ I added seriously.

He laughed heartily.

‘You think it will be so very long before you have finished your studies?’

He laughed again, and that day we went out on the terrace and had lessons there, walking slowly up and down in the sunlight. I saw that Mosén Joaquín had become fond of me. He made jokes and interspersed his teaching with stories.

But his enthusiasm led him to speak of me to the Jesuits — members of a permanent mission which had been in the town for some years studying the possibility of founding a college. At the time they had only a chapel and an old sprawling house, along whose verandas they sometimes strolled in the middle of the afternoon. Their chapel was generally known as ‘the Society’. ‘I’m going to the Society’, ‘I’ve come from the Society’. My father had a great respect for the Jesuits, but he had never cultivated their friendship. He considered them too worldly. He preferred the Augustinians, the Carmelites, the Benedictines.

One day after class there appeared at Mosén Joaquín’s house a Jesuit with a huge belly held in by his black sash. He and Mosén Joaquín talked of things that did not interest me, and when lessons were over the Jesuit invited me to walk with him. I accepted, and we set out.

The monk assumed a beatific and protective attitude, which was the worst he could possibly have taken with me. As if that were not enough, he took my right hand and held it between both his against his belly. And so we walked slowly along, he talking to me all the while with a luscious and maternal condescension. I was half crazy at the idea that my brothers-in-arms might see me in such a situation. I kept looking around but, fortunately, saw no one. The monk, beating time with his slow steps, was saying:

'We have football games and a library of adventure stories, but we have something even better, something you would never dream of.'

'What is it?' I asked curiously.

'A moving magic lantern. What is called a cinematograph.'

It interested me, but if I had to pay for it by exhibiting myself with him in the street, my hand in his, walking slowly in time with his immense belly and listening to him talk the way Aunt Ignacia talked to my little sisters when they first began walking, I renounced even the cinematograph. The man wanted to destroy my work of years in an instant. I pulled my hand away and ran until I had reached home. The next day I had to explain to Mosén Joaquín, and I told him what had taken place. My tutor looked at me strangely — I don't know whether with sympathy or with sarcasm — and said:

'Obviously that is no way for a bandit chief to walk down the street, is it?'

'I am not a bandit chief,' I said seriously.

I saw in his look his fear that the course of our relations would change and I would stop studying again.

'Then what are you?' he asked, without a trace of sarcasm.

'I told you that one day.'

'Ah, yes,' he said, and was silent, remembering with an effort.

The following weeks were entirely calm. I studied, because I felt that I was really on the road to becoming the lord of

wisdom, since there were days when I knew more than Mosén Joaquín, whom my father held to be a man of high culture. And the love between Valentina and myself was beginning to enter the pleasant and peaceful plane of habit. My father had found a solution to the difficulty with the bank, according to what my sister Concha told me, by making an even larger venture. I did not understand the nature of it. My sister spoke of my father's emerging victorious, and so it must have been. My father was satisfied and bought a small cabriolet. He retired our old horse, whose activities thereafter were restricted to eating grain and walking about, and bought a young one. My mother protested against the expense, but she ended by catching my father's enthusiasm. He was so pleased that although he found my fifth 'Univer-siad' — this time with more than ten pages written on both sides — he did not tear it up.

The pleasure of taking off boots and putting on slippers after running around was greater every day, because now the sun was strong. For the same reason, Valentina and I indulged in our enjoyment much more frequently. My father began to have faith in me, and, though he knew that I studied on the roof and sometimes danced there both by moonlight and by sunlight, he did not take it too badly and gave up trying to understand it. But I remained isolated. 'When I have passed my examinations,' I said to myself, 'I'll put the question of marriage to Don Arturo seriously.' I knew already that if you were out of money you asked the bank for it, and if they didn't give it to you right away you had to go and spend a week in the country, at the farm of a relative of ours. When you came back from your excursion, the bank gave you money.

My sister Maruja never liked to ride in the 'stylet', as we called the old carriage, the name being a diminutive of 'sty', which is the place where pigs live — because it was soiled by pigeons and hens. For my part, I liked to ride in it with the old horse because I was allowed to drive. I no longer took

Maruja seriously because my conduct in respect to my studies had given me a pre-eminent role, and I was for ever joking her about the 'stylet'. She found out things about my past — fragments of, fact, misunderstood information — and went to my mother with them, hoping that they would be brought up against me all over again. She told a story of my having made a blunderbuss and having killed seven people with it by the river. I bit my fists with rage. Which of my comrades could have been imbecile enough to relate such things to an irresponsible little fool who was sure to tell them?

My comrades did not look kindly on my abandoning them and began conspiring, but just when the atmosphere had become unbreathable I set out for Zaragoza with Mosén Joaquín. We went to the station, which was some distance away, in the new cabriolet. Maruja flew into a rage because she had never been in the new carriage. It was obvious that Mosén Joaquín was going with me, but he was going 'to keep me company'. She wanted to come too, but was not allowed to, and stood in the *porte-cochère* muttering:

'If he fails, he'll be apprenticed to a shoemaker.'

The train took three hours to reach the city, and we went to the Hôtel Fornos on the Arco de Cinegio. We were taken there from the station with other travellers in an immense horse-drawn omnibus whose wheels made a tremendous racket on the pavement and whose windows buzzed in a thousand corners. All through the journey Mosén Joaquín had treated me as a friend. Not once did he mention studies or textbooks or examinations. Seeing the landscape through the window turning slowly round us like a disc, he had said: 'See that? It shows that the earth is round.' That was his only scholarly remark.

When we arrived, Mosén Joaquín went to see some acquaintances — professors in religious colleges — who, it appeared, were friends of my examiners. I went out into the Arco de Cinegio and reconnoitred in all directions until I

had established landmarks. I had fifteen half-peseta silver pieces (seven and a half pesetas in all) which my mother had given me. I found a shop and bought five post cards with views of the city, making sure that they all showed 'tram lines'. I also bought stamps, and then continued my inspection of the quarter. In one direction I went as far as the Calle de Don Jaime, in another to the Plaza de la Independencia, in yet another, in which I had to go quite a distance through narrow alleys and then through a covered arcade full of brilliant shops, to the Plaza de Sas. In the centre of the Plaza de Sas there was a kiosk which sold newspapers, flowers, and birds. I went to it and was much surprised to see behind a lattice dozens of huge frogs in buckets. I asked the price of them. They were ten centimes apiece, and I bought five. One for Valentina, one for Concha, one for Mosén Joaquín if he wanted it, and two for myself. I took them back to the hotel, dropped them in the bath, and sat down to write my first post card to Valentina.

'It is different here,' I began, without daring to put 'Dear Valentina' because my experience with Enriqueta had made me afraid of the expression, 'all the streets are paved like the rooms and the sidewalks at home. Also there is nothing but love everywhere. In the vestibule of my hotel there are a lot of newspapers fastened to sticks, like flags, and you sometimes see in big letters: "The Love of My Life", "Love of All Loves", "Wounded for Love." It appears that all this happens in the theatres. A big hug from your unforgettable Pepe. P.S. I have just seen a tramcar in front of the hotel with a sign saying "Madrid". I shall go to Madrid and write you again from there. Farewell.' I wrote the address, put on a stamp, and dropped it into the hotel letterbox.

Mosén Joaquín returned feeling satisfied. It appeared that everything was going well. I would be examined the following day. We did not talk about books or studies. It seemed that the whole tangle of classes and declensions and theorems had been left behind in some remote sphere. After dinner

Mosén Joaquín went out again, leaving me, with some other boys in the court, in the care of the hotel manager and making me promise not to go beyond the districts that I had explored in the morning. But I had to go to Madrid, among other reasons because I had told Valentina that I would. I went to the Plaza de la Independencia and boarded a tram marked 'Madrid'. The conductor gave me a ticket, and we travelled through avenues and streets and squares and finally through empty lots for half an hour. When we stopped, the passengers all began to get out. Everyone except myself was carrying a satchel. I looked out the window and saw the metal roof of a railway station, a number of slate-tiled buildings, and two or three chimneys. The conductor said:

'Here we are.'

'Does the car go back?' I asked.

The conductor said yes and got out to turn the trolley around. Then he turned over the seats. I looked about and said to myself, 'This is Madrid'. I had to buy another ticket, and at the end of the journey I found myself opposite the Arco de Cinegio and felt that I had been through an adventure which, if it was not perilous, was decidedly 'manly'. And I sat down to write another card to Valentina:

'I have just come back from Madrid. The boys there don't seem like boys any more than the ones in Zaragoza. They wanted me to play in the hotel but I preferred to go to Madrid. On the way, there was a wooden fence with large letters on it saying, "The Triumph of Love". When I got back I saw that they had changed the printed cards in the revolving door and that instead of the one that said "Wounded for Love" they had put another that says "The Last Battle". I send you many embraces from your unforgettable Pepe. P.S. I take the examinations to-morrow. It was to be another day but I got them to put it forward for me so that I can be back sooner. Farewell.'

During the night an incident occurred of a sort that frequently marked my comings and goings. The frogs started

croaking, and in the concavity of the bath their voices were like thunder. Although I was asleep and did not waken, the servants unlocked my door and shook me until I told them where the frogs were. I could hear people protesting in the corridors and the adjoining rooms. They wanted to take the frogs away from me, but I protested and said that they were mine and I would not allow myself to be robbed of them. I put them on the balcony in the bottom of a flower pot, but they continued to be annoying. The protests began again, and I declared that they would croak no more. I put them back in the bathroom but this time I left the light burning. Frogs never croak when it is light.

The examinations were like a family gathering, everyone pleasant and smiling. I began with Latin, and Mosén Joaquín could not laugh at the professor because the latter was ill and his assistant, who was a priest, took his place. Mosén Joaquín believed that only priests had the right to know Latin. My examination was brilliant. The professor assured us with great seriousness that many of the questions were really more suitable for 'the higher faculties'.

In the geography and geometry examinations I did less brilliantly, but the professors seemed to want to show me that they liked me, and they exchanged smiles with Mosén Joaquín, who was present, seated near the examiners. When the examinations were over we stayed, walking up and down the cloister waiting for my marks. It was already noon, and we were very hungry, when a beadle appeared with a packet of certificates. On my three examinations I had got two 'outstandings' and one 'excellent'. Mosén Joaquín was radiant.

I wrote Valentina another post card:

'I was only the lord of power and love before. I tell you this in confidence. But now I am the lord of wisdom too. I was awarded two unanimous "outstandings" and one "excellent". This afternoon we are going to a play at the Fuentelara, a big theatre where they give edifying plays,

according to Mosén Joaquín. The play is called *Saint Catharine of Siena*, and it is a pity because to-morrow they are giving another one called *Divine Human Love*, which seems appropriate for us. You are the first person I want to know the triumph of your unforgettable Pepe. P.S. Don't show this to anyone except your mother so that she can be the one to spread the good news. Farewell.'

In the afternoon we went to the theatre. I thought that 'edifying' was a literary expression and expected something special like battles in the colonies with plenty of dead, but it was nothing but well-dressed people facing each other and arguing interminably. Afterwards I inquired and learned that 'edifying' plays were those in which virtue finally triumphed.

The next morning we rose early to catch the train and reach home by dinner time. I was received in triumph. Valentina had had only my first post card; the others did not arrive until the following day. But Mosén Joaquín had sent my father a telegram. Everyone knew except Valentina. I felt annoyed, and started to write a letter to the King to tell him to remedy the shameful condition of the mails.

For the examinations in September, I still had three subjects left that we hardly took seriously: grammar, calligraphy, and physical education. Grammar was the only one that I had to study a little, but no one reminded me of it, and we were already making preparations for our summer holiday and I did not even have a copy of the textbook. My friends were dazzled, but they continued to conspire against me, and I received news of several intrigues in which I was obliged to intervene if I wanted to maintain my authority. Carrasco was one of those who rose against me. The basis of the rebellions was the fact that my two empty pistols had been found near the ford. Losing them, I lost my power.

About June 10th everything was ready for us to leave for the castle of Sancho Garcés Abarca for the summer. To part from Valentina seemed intolerable when Doña Julia

told me that they were to spend two weeks in August at San Sebastian. San Sebastian was the fashionable resort, the most favoured beach. I told Valentina again that the boys in the city were like onions — it seemed that their heads had been kept under ground and they came up white, with shinings skins. They always walked hand in hand with grown-ups and their hair was so well brushed that a fight seemed an impossibility.

I begged Doña Julia — fruitlessly — to allow Valentina to come with us. When her mother almost yielded, her father intervened clamorously:

‘What a place, what a place for her to go!’

My mother said that the castle was extremely comfortable and really in the mountains, almost among the peaks of Navarre. It would be healthy, especially for children. Doña Julia looked at me and said:

‘The seashore would be good for Pepe — sea air is sedative.’

My father conferred upon me the honour of arranging our journey. We had to use both carriages and carry two mattresses and a quantity of bed linen in the old one. One of the mattresses was for my mother’s bed, the other for Concha’s. They were the only two proper beds we took, although I liked the others better because they were called ‘campaign beds’, which is to say ‘camp beds’. They were small single beds composed of a steel frame inside which was stretched a piece of canvas edged with leather. Through the leather, which was perforated with metallic eyeholes, a waxed cord was looped to the steel frame, making it possible to keep the canvas taut and springy. We children were to sleep in these single beds, which pleased me not a little.

In the first expedition all of us except my sister Concha, my mother, and Aunt Ignacia set out with my father. My father went ahead on horseback with a corporal of rural guards whose sector was precisely the territory surrounding the castle. Our old coachman drove the cabriolet, and I followed in the old carriage — the sty — in which, among saucepans, mat-

tresses, and blankets, Maruja had been unwillingly installed. Only the maids rode in the sty, and Luisa, who sat beside me on the box. . The old horse seemed perfectly contented now that he had the young ones for company. My father had bought a third horse, a saddle horse, and he was pleased to make a show of youth and energy. He had three bells hanging from his breast strap, and the cool early morning put us all, except Maruja, in a fine humour. We should be installed in the castle before noon; in the afternoon my mother, Concha, and Aunt Ignacia would follow on a second trip. The old horse was to remain at home when he returned; two journeys in one day would have been too much for him.

As soon as we got into the open country I began to sing. The castle of Sancho Garcés stood on the topmost height of a conical mountain. My father sometimes indulged a weakness for saying that our family had originated there. Sancho Garcés had been King of Navarre, which at that time included half of present-day Aragon, just as the Aragon of his day had included part of modern Catalonia. The main portion of the castle — the old fortifications — was in ruins. A wall completely surrounded the highest part of the mountain and extended like a steep series of stairs down the declivity which connected the high peak of Sancho Garcés with a chain of mountains which continued into Navarre. The wall had lost more than half its height, and the great hewn stones had in the course of time rolled down the mountain. What was left of the wall did not, however, seem like a ruin. Within the wall there was an enormous level space which had been the parade ground. The portion which faced the north was closed off by structures of great solidity; walls whose doors and windows sometimes showed a thickness of six feet. On one side of the parade ground the chapel displayed its Romanesque lines; opposite it at the other end of the immense space there was a group of one-story stone buildings which surrounded the yards and stables; with their Romanesque doorways, they bore witness to the

multiplicity of offices which were needed in a castle where six or eight generations sometimes lived without leaving it and neither grandparents nor grandchildren knew any horizon but precipitous rocks and eagles' nests. The castle overlooked a space of fifty miles in every direction except the north, in which the series of abrupt peaks was continued. One did not need to know much about war to realize that not a bird could pass that chain of mountains without permission from the occupants of the castle; but for fifty miles to the southward too, nothing could move without their being aware of it.

The rest of the family arrived before dark. From the castle we could see our town in the distance, with the nuns' tower, which was as high as the tower of the parish church. Through my field glasses the tower was so clear that it seemed surprising not to hear the bell. The only inhabitants of the castle were the old sextons who looked after the chapel and the corporal of rural guards who, with his wife and children and two or three other families, lived in a part which had much the appearance of a deserted village.

In this barbarous and romantic combination, it was impossible to tell where man's work ended and nature's began. There, on a block of stone which projected beside my window, was a pair of birds of prey; they gave their hoarse cry when they saw me and were off in high, easy flight. On top of the ruined keep behind the chapel some storks were perched among the yellow mustard and the vines. They were migrating storks, resting a moment on their journey to other lands. At night we sometimes heard the howling of a vixen.

V I I

THE day after our arrival my father rose very early and set off with his gun. About eight o'clock I heard shots, and dressed and went out to investigate. More shots gave me the

direction, and at last, with the aid of my field glasses, I discovered my father on the side of a hill at the foot of the mountain. Then I saw him raise his gun to his shoulder again and fire. Through my field glasses my father's shots produced a charming effect. A jet of white smoke issued from the barrel in perfect silence, and it was only long afterwards, when he had the gun under his arm again or was reloading it, that I heard the report.

After waking several times to listen to the wind, which seemed to want to tear down the castle, I had slept well and was thoroughly recovered from the emotions of our journey; the morning was cool and bright and the wind seemed to have fallen. I walked around the chapel until I came to the ruined keep, immense and square. In the midst of untamed nature there were spots carefully paved with blocks more than a yard square. A great sundial on the octagonal corner tower of the chapel, with a sentence in Latin: 'All wound, the last kills.' Next, I explored the wall which ran round the parade ground. I calculated that the parade ground would hold over forty thousand men drawn up in formation. There was a place where the ground ceased to be level and a ramp began which led down to where the wall was closed by a rudely carved gateway. The top of the gateway was on a level with the parade ground because the ramp made a steep descent. The wall was continued beyond the gateway along the road, which descended the mountain in violent zigzags, but it was soon lost among the rocks.

The corporal greeted me from a distance; he was dressed like any other peasant, except that he wore a wide diagonal belt of braided leather with a copper disc in the middle of it inscribed: 'Forestry Section, District of Ejea de los Caballeros.' He told me that he was going to fetch water from the 'spring of the wild goat'. The water from it contained a great deal of iron.

'Is that what makes it good?' I asked.

'There's nothing to equal it.'

The corporal went to mount his mule. I followed him, but when we started out I heard someone call me from a window. Aunt Ignacia, who was very sorry for us all because we had come to live in such a place when we owned a 'decent' house, threw down a knitted jacket to me:

'Carry it over your arm and put it on when you begin to perspire.'

I folded it, tucked it under my belt, and started off with the corporal, looking covertly, with an envy which I cannot describe, at the copper-mounted Remington carbine slung from his saddle.

I asked him if he had ever shot anyone.

He said that he never had, and that he earnestly hoped that the occasion would not arise.

As I went along I collected grasshoppers, which I put under my shirt. Some of them escaped through the most unlikely apertures, but I found I had four or five left, which were enough to put in Maruja's bed. They did not bite or do any harm, but they would give her a good fright.

There was a small stone vault over the spring, built to prevent the wind from blowing dust into it. On the right side of the vault there was a bas-relief of a religious subject. Beside it the words 'Sancta Maria' were engraved on the stone in Romanesque letters.

'It was made in the old days,' said the guard, 'to protect the spring from the corrupt winds that sometimes blew from France.'

'Eh?' I said, not understanding.

'Yes, and it still happens now. When you drink from a spring hereabouts you must be careful not to open your mouth too wide, because the demons who travel on the winds lie in wait beside springs to enter your body when you drink. And if you yawn while you're on the mountain, even if you are not near a spring, make the sign of the cross on your mouth at least three times, because if you don't they can enter your body.'

He added that on some nights they came in legions — hundreds and hundreds of them — and groaned as they passed over the roofs, and that the wind sometimes ‘knocked someone’s head’ against the corner of his house.

‘Yes. I heard them last night,’ I said, and it was true.

When we had loaded the mule with four jars of water from the spring, which was about half-way down the mountain, we started back. Before we had reached the gateway in the wall we saw my father coming up too. He was carrying a number of partridges and rabbits and had tucked a large white handkerchief under his canvas hat to protect his neck and ears; it danced in the breeze.

‘Getting sunburned, Don José?’

The corporal congratulated my father on his success as a hunter, but reminded him that he need not go to so much trouble — with a little skill and patience he could shoot partridges from the window of his bedroom. My father asked him numerous questions concerning the habits of partridges and presented him with a rabbit.

I went up to my room to write to Valentina. I still had two of the post cards I had bought in Zaragoza, and I wrote on them both. I put stamps on them, though later I was told that they were not necessary. I mentioned on the post cards that ‘I was no longer in Zaragoza and that if I wrote to her *from there* it was because I had had more than enough’. My father read them and asked me what I had had more than enough of — post cards or Zaragoza? I answered, both. I went on to say in my post cards that the castle could hold a thousand warriors, and that if she came with her mother one day I should be able to see them through my field glasses as soon as they left their house. ‘There is no love here — nor theatres, nor books of poems — but I have found a very ancient spring where Sancho Garcés’ warriors used to drink. There is iron in the water, and they say that makes it very good, but I don’t believe it because I’ve never seen anyone sucking a nail. There is writing on the wall which says:

Santa Maria
A star shines in the sky,
Guiding sailors through the sea.

The last two lines were of my own composition. And I added: 'I am a wanderer, travelling the roads alone and blind, but I see the star in the sky and it is you and you guide me.' And I ended, as always, 'Your unforgettable Pepe.'

When there was anything lyrical in my post cards my father read them and showed them to my mother, in alarm. My mother soothed him, and once she said to me:

'You are fond of poetry, my son. You take after me in that.'

I looked out the window. All the windows opened on to emptiness and faced some wild scene beyond. In the distance I could see a peak like ours on which there was another castle of Sancho Garcés Abarca, the ruins of which continued down the slope. It was larger than ours; sometimes clouds hung round it, with a turret visible above them. It was now uninhabitable. There was not even a road leading to it.

In the afternoon my father, who seemed impatient to explore everything, go everywhere, and hunt anything, asked me to go out with him again. We forced our way into unlikely places through shrubs and tall weeds, or stumbled dangerously over rocks. In the end we had to climb to the top of Sancho Abarca by goat-paths because we were far from the road. We arrived at nightfall, exhausted. We had been exploring the possibilities of hunting the larger kinds of game. It had not been dark an hour before everyone succumbed to drowsiness, and we were in bed by nine o'clock. Once again the wind howled and made the walls of my room tremble; in the comfort and warmth of my bed I felt that I was being carried through space in an enormous projectile. Finally I fell into a heavy sleep.

The next morning the corporal had brought letters, and my father had to put on civilized clothes — except for his riding boots — and go to town. He said that he would return

by evening. I was left alone — I mean, I was the only man left — and I decided to explore the other castle.

It took more than two hours to reach it. There were lizards warming themselves in the sun among the ruins; when they saw me they raised their heads, uncertain whether to run or not. It was all far more ruinous than it appeared to be from a distance. I found a rusty key, ornamented with a complicated design, and kept it as a trophy. Just then I heard a sheep bell. I started toward it and found that I had to leave the castle, go round it, and descend the last outworks. Down there I found a very old shepherd wrapped in sheepskins and wearing sandals [*abarcas*] that were doubtless of the same pattern as those worn by Sancho Garcés' men. Around him, scattered among the ruins, were several hundred ewes.

'Good-morning!'

'Your father,' he said, without any preface, 'is fond of hunting. There are mountain goats around here.'

He pointed with his staff to a nearby wood. He added: 'If you go through there on your way home you'll see one jump.' Apparently the shepherd knew my father or had encountered him on his wanderings. Or perhaps the shepherd knew everything.

'Did you come to see the castle?'

'Yes.'

'What are you looking for?'

'Nothing.'

'But you have something in your hand.'

I showed him the key. He looked at it for a time in great surprise, as if he did not know what to say. Finally he spoke:

'The lord of this castle lost one battle. Only one.'

I knew it already from having heard my father tell it. He lost one battle because once, when he was encamped with his host in a nearby valley, the enemy came and when his military councillors told him that he must move his camp so that he could give battle successfully, he saw that the swallows had nested among the tent poles:

‘How can we break camp?’

Above the edges of the nests appeared the ugly, hungry beaks of the young swallows. ‘How can we break camp?’ And they did not break camp. And they went to meet the enemy in another place, and lost the battle, though half the host was able to return to the camp and wait until the young swallows could fly. Then they broke camp and returned to the castle, which the enemy was besieging, and they broke the siege and entered the castle. That was the story my father had told me. The shepherd said:

‘On that hill over there, there is a small castle, and another over there. And another there. Look! And the lord of this castle had many bastard sons and only one legitimate son whose name was Garcés. And the bastards were named such names as De Dios, Esmeralda, De la Peña, Del Castillo. This district is full of those names. One day the Moors came up through the valley, and it looked as if the battle next morning would be an ugly one. And the lord went to visit the small castles, which had been built in the ravines to give warning, one after the other. And when he came to that one, he called out, without dismounting from his horse: “*Ave Maria*. Who dwell within there, and what is their toil?”

“‘Here within,” answered one of his many bastard sons who were awaiting the enemy, “dwell six score sons of whores all ready to lay down their lives for you, our father and lord”.’

And looking dreamily at the ruins, the shepherd added:

‘That is why that little castle is called by a bad name now, “the stronghold of the sons of whores”.’

Then the shepherd gave me a leather purse which he had tanned and made himself, and I hung it at my side from my belt. I tried to think of something to give him, but I had nothing of any value. The shepherd smiled and, seeing that I was ready to leave, repeated:

‘If you want to see mountain goats jump, go carefully through that little wood.’

I went down the mountain on the side opposite the castle, entered the wood, whose trees were so closely interlaced above that no light at all came through, and continued walking, guided by a distant brightness. I arrived in time to see a stag and three fawns disappearing among the trees. In the centre of the wood there was a pool of rain water in a bed of rock. The fawns went there to drink. I told my father about it when I reached home and thus escaped a reprimand for having been lost in the mountains all day. Luisa stared at me in real alarm. She looked strange in that rocky place. She seemed like a doll which the sun or the wind or any stone would hurt and destroy if she wandered six feet from my mother's skirts. When she looked at the savage majesty of the rocks, the mountains, and the clouds, her face wore the expression of one who has received a personal affront.

Maruja, on the other hand, wanted to be thought brave, and even went out beyond the gateway, all by herself. She always said that she was going to 'catch males', but they made her come back. My hate for her had disappeared. From the height of my triumphs in matters military, naval, amorous, and academic, I could not look upon her as an enemy. To keep up the old custom, I tried to tease her, but in small, unimportant ways; the shine on her nose — which was not shiny like a nose, but shiny like metal — the same shine that appeared on her forehead and the point of her chin was the most frequent subject of my jokes. There was a certain tenderness at the bottom of them, and this my mother understood when Maruja ran to accuse me of 'having insulted her'. But only a few days after we came to the castle something happened which I cannot recollect even now without terror. We were on the second story of the principal part of the castle. There was a wooden balustrade that ran from one side of a large room to another above the staircase which led down to the story below. Maruja was sitting playing on the floor by the balustrade, and I was preparing a sort of framework out of sticks and string of something for

the blind I was thinking of making. My little sister was angry with me and kept insulting me. Her way of being insulting was to repeat over and over again, mechanically and passionlessly, the whole possible repertory of childish insults. I finally became annoyed, started toward her, and, when I was half-way, saw her disappear between the balusters and fall into space. I heard a soft thud followed by absolute silence. She is dead, I thought. She is dead. I did not dare to look down the stairs for fear I should see positive proof. I heard my mother, Aunt Ignacia, and one of the maids arrive, lamenting. Then I went down. My sister had fallen on the stairs. No blood could be seen, but she looked as if she were dead. We picked her up, and the news was spread through the house. I believed that I was guilty of the crime; but fortunately there was no crime. My sister recovered consciousness a little later, and arnica dressings were applied to her head. The first thing my little sister said when she opened her eyes was that I had picked her up, lifted her over the balustrade, and let her drop. I heard her, and could not even wish that she had been killed, because she was so frail and defenceless that it was impossible to wish it. Yet it was the only thing that could save me. My father was alone in denying her accusations. When I heard him say that Maruja was lying, I began to feel that perhaps we could become friends. Maruja, seeing that she had failed, began to weep bitterly and said that she hurt all over. It was not true. Nothing hurt her and she had suffered no injuries. A bump on the head, like others we had received without losing consciousness or accusing anybody. It is true, none the less, that I have never understood why she was not killed.

Two days later we went after the deer. My father and I had gone to bed at six o'clock the evening before, with the sun still above the horizon. By two o'clock in the morning we were already up, and the water was splashing in the wash-bowl where my father bathed every morning amidst stormy sounds of water. We set out. We went straight down in total

darkness after crossing the beds of two streams grown over with brambles and strewn with great grey rocks. Before dawn we had circled the other castle, and as we entered the wood the sky began to lighten in tints of cinnabar red. A few seconds later the whole firmament was a dome the colour of bull's blood. My father hurried me along:

'Come on, quick! If we don't get posted before dawn the deer will scent us.'

On the farther side of a little open pool in a clear space in the woods we rapidly built a blind, taking advantage of the natural disposition of the rocks and tree trunks. It was not exactly beside the pool but about twenty yards beyond it in the opposite direction from the wind.

My father, looking out through a loop hole, asked softly: 'Where did you see them run off?'

I pointed to the place. 'That is where they will always run to, because when an animal is surprised and in danger it never runs to a place it does not know.'

The deer had not appeared, but they would come because there had been no moon and it is only on moonlight nights that they go to drink before dawn. Our ears kept deceiving us with the illusion of leaves rustling among the trees. The wind brought us the faintest sounds.

But nothing came. The tension of the first minutes had disappeared when we heard a faint hissing. It seemed as if there was another hunter present who was warning us to be still. And into the open place in the woods came two large snakes, chasing each other so agilely that our eyes could not follow them. At last they stopped and began to lift themselves into the air on their tails. And they started dancing. I am not joking. They started dancing, and they danced for more than half an hour. Sometimes they stretched themselves upward to their full length, and they measured more than six feet. My father had never seen anything like it. I did not know whether to laugh or to start running. The kingdom to which I laid claim was not the kingdom of snakes.

When the snakes seemed to be growing quiet, we really heard the noise of trampled leaves. The snakes fled as fast as they had come. My father got his gun ready, and what appeared was not a deer at all but a bear. A big old bear, who looked in our direction, suspiciously.

‘A bear!’

‘Quiet!’

My father was as frightened as I was. He fired both barrels together, and the bear, who did not seem to have been touched, raised his head and looked in our direction. At the same moment the shepherd whom I had encountered in the ruins of the castle walked up to the bear and scratched him under the chin. The shepherd cupped both hands around his mouth and, turning in our direction — we were still in our hiding place, unable to comprehend what was going on — shouted:

‘Why, what harm did Mateo do you?’

My father looked at me and finally said:

‘Son, pinch my arm.’

I pinched it. The shepherd said:

‘The mountain goats don’t come here. You have to go farther up.’

And he walked quietly away with the bear. Farther on, toward the ruins of the castle, we could hear the bells of his flock.

My father and I came out of hiding and returned to our castle. We did not mention our failure. My father appeared to be deeply preoccupied, and only exclaimed now and again:

‘It’s just like what happened to Uncle Monico.’

I realized the drama of the situation and did not dare ask what that was. But he repeated it once more, and I felt obliged to.

‘Was it about a bear too?’

‘No, a wolf. But I am not going to tell you about it because you are too young to understand it.’

I did not insist. We reached the castle at noon. My father went into the chapel, intending, apparently, to turn to God in his perplexity. I too. The chapel was wrapped in a delicious humid darkness. My father lighted the lamp before the altar and knelt down. The alabaster image went back to the time when Sancho Garcés had lived in the castle, and was even older, in the Byzantine style, according to my father, who knew something about it. It was covered to the neck by a conical mantle bordered with silver and gold. The image was rather large for this sort of statue in Spain, and while my father prayed I noticed that some moving thing was peering over its shoulder. I fixed my attention on it. It was a lizard. Later I saw tobacco-coloured squirrels in the holes of the chapel vault as well. My father continued praying, and I kept quiet. The lizard remained perched on the shoulder of the image and seemed to be looking curiously at us and the lamplight. It sniffed at the ear of the image, descended to its embroidered mantle, on which it looked like an additional ornament, and slowly returned to its post on its shoulder.

Later on I told my mother about it. Aunt Ignacia, who was present, said quickly:

‘That was not a lizard.’

‘What was it then?’

‘The devil. In places like this even the Virgin has the devil round her neck.’

My mother smiled. She was less religious than my father, contrary to what is usually the case in families.

Before dinner I walked round the parade ground with a heavy iron-tipped walking stick.

I had written Valentina another letter and sent her new variations on the song. Melancholy ones, now:

Come along and play,
Play till time for bed,
Playing in the ring
Of cinnamon-bread.

All in my father's garden
Tall grows the tree
Full of empty nests
For you and for me.
For me, for me,
Valentina and Valenti.
When I kissed you
And started away
I knew that you
Would cry all day.
Dindle and dandle!
Here comes the notary
Bringing his candle!

Valentina would learn to sing them to the music. I wrote the last stanza in the hope that she would sing it at home.

The next day I was wandering around the parade ground, and, for lack of something better to do, I began poking with my stick at a large flagstone whose outline was lost under earth and grass. I noticed that my blows produced a hollow sound, and I went to tell the corporal. He found an iron bar, which the peasants call a *barrón* and which they use as a throwing stick or javelin, but after violent efforts we were able to move the stone only a little. My father became interested and brought another lever, and between the two of them they succeeded in raising the stone. Beneath it was an opening, regularly circular and more than a yard in diameter. My father and the corporal looked at each other in astonishment, and the corporal said that these mountains were full of caves and that in one of them the cup which Christ had used on the Mount of Olives was hidden. But this opening must be a well. There might be water in it and there might not. They threw in pieces of burning paper to light the shaft. There was no indication that it had ever held water. The walls were of hewn stone, smooth and well fitted. The corporal offered to go down and explore. I

too offered to go, but they both agreed that I might not. They fetched a rope, a lantern, and a pickaxe. The corporal let himself down by the rope with the lantern on his belt and the pickaxe over his shoulder.

The corporal shouted up from below to say that everything was clean and in order and that there was a blocked-up door there which he was going to break open. My father went down too, and soon afterwards I heard the monotonous sound of the pick separating stones and mortar. I protested so much that they finally let me join them. I descended rapidly. As soon as a part of the wall gave way they put the lantern through the hole and looked in curiously. It was the beginning of a gallery which ran straight on for over a hundred yards. They enlarged the opening, and we all three entered. I wanted to go ahead so that I could tell Valentina I had been first, but my father kept calling to me and forced me to stay in the rear. My father was not aware that it frightened me to stay behind, and I ended by taking a place between the corporal, who went first, and my father.

I looked about anxiously. Beneath the place where we now stood there were other subterranean passages containing fragments of yet earlier lives. What I saw interested me greatly on account of my 'Universiad', in which I should have to describe it. My father, who was not particularly strong in history — all that he really knew was concerned with wines and horses and sculptural styles — put his hand on the wall and exclaimed:

'A great people, the Romans!'

He immediately added that, though Rome had invaded us, the principal Roman emperors thereafter were Spaniards, like Trajan. And he told us wonderful things about Trajan.

The gallery that opened off to one side had a clean, flagstoned pavement. In order not to lose his way, my father took a piece of paper and began to make a map, starting at the point where we had entered. It appeared that the gallery

ran on for hundreds of yards. To the left there were some fairly large square chambers. In the first one we saw a clay jar. It was full of blackened coins which, under a tightly adherent layer of dust, could be seen to be silver. We left them undisturbed, with the intention of returning for them later. They were of the ninth century, to my father's great disappointment, who wished they had been Roman. In another chamber which opened off the gallery a little farther on there was nothing but a rope hanging from the roof and under it, on the ground, a heap of human remains and bits of rotting cloth. This discovery was enough to check the curiosity of all three explorers, but we went on.

The gallery ended in a round chamber in the middle of which was a large square block of stone. We struck it with our sticks to see if it was hollow or not, but it was a solid block. From this chamber four more galleries ran in four directions.

'Here,' my father said, 'the persecuted Christians said Mass.'

The guard insisted that the chalice of Christ's passion was hidden in these caves.

We continued our investigations, but as it was a task that would take nearer to a week than a day, we decided to return. When we were out in daylight again, we met the rural priest who came on Sundays to say Mass for us. He had already said two, one in the village and another in a saint's chapel, and as he had swallowed two good mouthfuls of wine fasting, he was a little dizzy. He was in a great hurry to say his last Mass and have breakfast, and we all went to the chapel. The sexton was present in his new clothes and assisted him. He did not speak his sentences in Latin but uttered their phonetic equivalent in Spanish. For example, when he was supposed to say, 'Et cum spiritu tuo,' he said, 'Según se mire es tuyo'. The long prayer of the 'Oremus' was something which produced an uncontrollable laugh in my father. When the priest elevated the host, the sexton heard the corporal's dog

scratching himself and, forsaking his bell, chased the animal out of the chapel:

'God damn it, this is no place for a dog to get rid of his fleas,' he said.

After Mass the sexton spoke to my father:

'Haven't you forgotten something, Don José?'

'What?'

My father had once jokingly told him that he knew as much about the Mass as a priest, and that he would buy him a chasuble for feast days and he could say Mass as an auxiliary deacon. On this account, the sexton there and then began to chant the Epistle of Saint Paul after his fashion. The priest and my father restrained their laughter. Later my father said, nodding his head:

'God is better pleased with his absurdities than with the prayers of many bishops.'

The priest breakfasted heartily — the state of slight intoxication he had manifested when he arrived disappeared as he ate — and then took his departure. My father accompanied him as far as the foot of the mountain.

We did not return to our subterranean explorations that day. During the night I woke frequently because the wind was making a louder noise than usual, and I connected its wailing with the mysteries of the crypts we had discovered. My father had told of our discoveries at the supper table before we went up to bed. Since he had spoken, I did not feel obliged to keep still and chattered on unrestrainedly. Afterwards I went to my room and wrote to Valentina: 'With the discovery of the vaults,' I said, 'I shall soon be able to finish the "Universiad".'

The next day the corporal appeared with a long ladder, much more practical than our ropes for getting up and down. We descended — my father, the corporal, and I. We reconnoitred the territory we had already explored. From time to time we were made uneasy by a distant sound of footsteps, and we stopped until we discovered that they were only the

echo of our own. My father tried to account for our confusion by saying that there might well be fox dens thereabouts, but the corporal said that foxes preferred holes which were not deep and into which the sun shone.

He knew a great deal about foxes and had promised my sisters three pelts for collars and cuffs.

‘Will you have to go far to find them?’

‘No, sir. They come right to the door of my house. When I go over the mountains I fasten a little piece of pork rind to my boot and drag it all the way along. Then I set my trap at the door of my house, and the next day before I get up I hear the fox downstairs in the trap.’

We continued our explorations. In a vault whose roof sloped down to meet the floor we found another jar containing coins and parchments. The value of the coins was decidedly questionable, but we all felt as if we had discovered a treasure. My father gathered up the parchments to take home and announced that all these things belonged to the Provincial Museum of History and that no one must touch them. In a corner we found more calcined human remains. We returned to the circular chamber, from which a wide gallery descended at a steep slope. On either hand there was a long file of niches into which no one dared to flash the lantern because they obviously contained shattered tombs. The air was not damp, but it was cold. My father and the corporal were in their shirt sleeves, I in an undershirt. I was so cold that my teeth almost chattered, but I kept from showing it so that my father would let me go on. At the end of the descending gallery we found another large circular chamber with galleries running off in different directions. We decided to take the first, which turned to the right. Unlike the gallery we had been following, this one ran upward until it ended at a place where the roof met the floor at a very acute angle. My father told the corporal to dig into the obstruction. After half an hour’s work, daylight appeared. The corporal said that the exit had been stopped up in the course

of time by the natural accumulation of soil. We walked out, and found ourselves among the servants' quarters of the castle, in a small court surrounded by irregular buildings. Here must have lived the smiths, the wool dressers, the master crossbowmen, the armourers, the weavers.

Later when we were talking to my mother she asked me if we had closed the entrances to the subterranean passages again, and we were obliged to tell her that we had, in order to keep her from feeling afraid. My father, full of self-importance, retired to his room and tried to decipher the parchments, but was quite unable to make out a word.

We had invited Mosén Joaquín to visit us, and one morning he arrived and came limping up to the top of the castle. There he wiped the sweat from his face, sat down on a block of stone before he had greeted anyone, and said to my father:

'This is the kind of air that agrees with me.'

Aunt Ignacia brought luncheon to us where we were sitting: two partridges in pickle — prepared with oil and vinegar — and two bottles of wine. The corporal had come to kiss Mosén Joaquín's hand and looked at the tray, twirling his moustache. My father invited him to eat. Like Mosén Joaquín, he could tell where wine came from by its bouquet:

'This wine is at least eight years old and comes from the vineyard of Almoravides — right?'

My father answered that it was not eight years old but ten. It had been bottled the year I was born. As to the vineyard, he was right.

'This isn't wine, it's mother's milk,' the corporal said.

Comparing wine to mother's milk seemed to me rather a strange kind of joke. My father laughed, feeling flattered. But Mosén Joaquín wanted to go to the chapel. The three of us went together. I continued thinking about wine and mother's milk. Why did mother's milk have to be the best thing in the world? I had not had milk from a wet nurse, or even my mother's, although at that time I imagined that I had. Babies who sucked mother's milk aroused pity in me,

because they had no teeth. Mosén Joaquín knelt for a moment with bowed head when he passed in front of the image, then, as he rose, continued to my father:

'You are right, Don José. That wine came from Almora-vides.'

They entered the sacristy and a little later returned. I was saying that I called the image 'Our Lady of the Lizard' because there was always a lizard on its shoulder. Mosén Joaquín knelt again, bowed his head, and murmured for a few seconds. My father simply crossed himself, and I repented of having said what I did, although it was the first church I had seen where you could talk out loud just as you did in the street.

We went down into the vaults. I do not understand why Mosén Joaquín hoped to find fossils there. As we did not find any, he wanted to leave at once; he was completely uninterested by the other things.

In the afternoon as I saw that no one was paying any attention to me, I went to the ruins of the other castle hoping to find the shepherd. Since I had seen him caressing the bear I had been devoured by curiosity. I still wore the leather purse and the old key of the castle, one on the right, the other on the left. The shepherd was there, under an arch as usual, with his body in the sun and his bearded face in the shade. He received me kindly and at once reminded me that I had the key of the castle and that I must keep it carefully.

'Yes,' I said. 'But where is the bear?'

'What bear?'

'The one you brought to the wood the day we shot at him from our blind.'

'What blind? What wood?'

I explained and he listened attentively, but denied that he owned a bear or had ever brought one to the wood.

'However, it is possible that you saw me, because there are lamias hereabouts. And lamias make people see things that aren't so.'

He explained what they were. Female wood spirits, with webbed feet like geese or cloven hoofs like goats.

'Have you seen one?' I asked.

'Yes, more than one.'

'Are they very ugly?'

'No, they are the prettiest women I have ever seen. They have a little dimple here.'

He pointed to his bearded chin. He added that they were not to be trusted and that the first thing to do was to look at their feet. They were accustomed to wear very long skirts to hide them, but, that being the case, it was sufficient to lead them on to a place where the ground was damp, and look at the footprints they left.

'But what I saw was a man, not a woman.'

'With a bear?'

'Yes.'

'Then it was the veterinary's nephew — he has a bear.'

Not for anything would he himself have one, because every lamia has one of her own to ride on and there are as many lamias as there are bears, and if anyone has a tame bear then there is a lamia who has to go on foot and she will persecute him and when a son is born in his house she will put a bone from a cemetery in his swaddling clothes.

We remained silent. The shepherd went and lifted up a stone which was hot from a fire he had built on it and took out a piece of meat from among the smoking embers. From his bag he took bread, salt, and oil, seasoned the meat heavily, and began to eat. He said that he had hunted a rabbit, and that he never lacked fresh game.

'Have you a gun?' I asked him.

The shepherd laughed and said that when the rabbits saw a hunter with a new gun, leggings, cartridge belt, and a woollen muffler round his neck (I thought of Don Arturo), they danced for joy. 'But when they see this' — he held up his shepherd's staff — 'they call for confession'. He offered me something to eat, and I accepted. When we had finished, he said:

‘Come along if you like and I’ll show you the wine cellar.’

We went about twenty paces and he got down on his hands and knees, pushed aside some shrubbery, and disappeared between two rocks. I did likewise, feeling the agony that I have always experienced when I think of myself in a too confined space, but beyond the rocks the passageway became an enormous cavern which instantly reminded me of the galleries under our castle.

‘Come this way.’

I followed him and saw him stand up by the wall, put his hands into a vaulted niche which had the sepulchral look of those I had seen before, and pull out the neck of a wine skin through a crack in the tomb. It had a stopper which unscrewed. He took a small leather wine bag from his belt, removed its stopper too, and let a stream of wine pour from the skin to the bag; I could smell its fragrance. He stoppered the wine skin again, and we made our way back in silence. When we emerged the shepherd burst out laughing and said:

‘There’s where I keep my wine. The bishop himself doesn’t drink any cooler.’

‘But isn’t that a tomb?’

The shepherd looked at me for a time in silence:

‘Are you afraid of the dead?’

I shook my head for no, but the shepherd wanted to convince me:

‘I’ve been keeping wine there for thirty years. My father and my grandfather kept wine there before me. It hasn’t yet happened that the dead man — whoever he is — that lives there has drunk a single drop of it.’

I remained silent. After he had drunk a long draught he offered it to me and I drank a little. The wine was almost ice-cold, and the shepherd took it away from me before I had finished, saying:

‘Be careful, because it’s strong wine and if you drink much of it you’ll have to stay here and sleep it off or I’ll have to

carry you to the castle on my back. Neither of which would be proper.'

The afternoon was wearing on, and the sky began to grow pale. The shepherd considered the sun and the distance that separated me from the castle:

'You must start now, and if it gets dark before you arrive don't be afraid, for when anyone has had a drink of this wine the lamias can't do him any harm.'

I looked at him, enchanted with it all, and asked him if it was to exorcise the lamias that he kept wine in the tomb.

'Yes, young one, but you mustn't tell anybody because it is a custom that I inherited from my father and he from his grandfather and he from his great-grandfather and he from his great-great-grandfather and so on back to the time when God walked the roads.'

To show him that I was grateful for his revelation, I made him another. I told him that I had discovered the underground passages of our castle and that I had gone exploring more than a league under the earth gathering coins and old documents, and that one of the passageways connected with the castle in whose ruins we now were.

'All by yourself? I don't believe it.'

'Why not?'

'You say you had to dig into the ground and break through walls. When did you do it?'

'Yesterday.'

'Let me see your hands,' and, taking them and turning them palms up, 'where are the marks of the pickaxe?'

I felt so completely disarmed that I could almost have lain down and cried.

'If we are to be friends,' he added, 'no more lies! And now be off with you, because it is going to get dark.'

I wanted to prove to him that there was some truth in what I had said. At least the passageway connected with the castle. The shepherd understood how dramatic it would be for me to be able to convince him and he accepted part of what I said.

'Not this passageway, though. It may be another, but not this one.'

'Why not?'

'Because this one leads to hell. My grandfather wanted to go in once, and a devil appeared before him who knew the whole history of my family. He stood there telling him about his father and his grandfather and what their names were and what they thought about things, and from that day on my grandfather had a void in his guts that stayed with him until he died. So now, none of us ever go in any farther than the fourth tomb because — and don't forget this, young one — anything that is bad is good too if you take only a little of it. So, if you go far in you will find yourself with a void, and if you go still farther you will fall right into hell. But if you stay near the entrance like I do and keep wine in the tomb you get strong and the lamias can't do anything to you.'

And, feeling the wine bag, he shook his head and added:

'It's too cold, it goes down without your knowing it, and where it goes it gives such joy that there's nothing to do but go on drinking it. And now you see for yourself, it has gone to your head.'

He was right, but until he said so I had not realized it. It could not be said that I was drunk, though I did not know for sure what intoxication was. Well, I wasn't falling down, or even staggering, I talked normally, and I could come and go without having the road wriggle in front of me, and besides, if the shepherd had drunk much more than I had and wasn't drunk, why should I be?

'All drunkards tell the same story.'

'What story?'

'That they aren't drunk. But don't worry, young one — I'll take you home.'

Refusing any help from the shepherd, I thanked him for his kind intentions and set off. I ran most of the way back. When night fell I realized that if I ran I felt afraid, and I went along slowly, peering at the shadows on either hand,

although I knew that the lamias would not harm me even if they appeared. I sang Valentina's song:

'Dindle and dandle!
Here comes the notary
Bringing his candle!'

VIII

WHEN I reached home, everyone was uneasy, although they were becoming accustomed to worrying about me and having it come out all right in the end. There were new guests at the castle: the doctor and his wife. They welcomed me as an old friend. My father did not like to be alone for long and had invited them to spend Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. The doctor was enchanted, and his wife tried to approve of everything, saying 'How lovely!' in a tone of great conviction, as if she were at a bazaar. Like Aunt Ignacia and Luisa, she found nature, except in photographs, unconvincing.

When they understood that I did not intend to give any explanations — a thing which I had always considered humiliating — we went in to supper. Of the children, only Concha and I were present — the others were already asleep.

It was holiday fare, which is to say that supper lasted three long hours. My father had up wines to which Mosén Joaquín and the doctor did honour. The doctor's wife, who thought that the wines were harmless, immediately became flushed, although she drank very little.

After supper Mosén Joaquín, who had promised to read us his translation of the parchments we had found in the vault, produced several sheets of paper. At first the doctor fidgeted in his chair, expecting to be bored, but little by little he became interested, put first one elbow on the table and then the other, leaned toward Mosén Joaquín, and made gestures of

approval. The silence grew deeper and deeper. Concha and I listened with intense interest. The parchment ran, in a style which suggested the original Latin:

‘Preface made by me to the ordinances of this castle of Sancho Garcés Abarca which is to be read once a month on the fast day of our Holy Mother and at the hour of vespers, before the captains and lettered men, by the Master of the Order of Santiago below signing and which preface all shall bear in mind, according to their obligation, to conform their souls to it in time of peace or war as may be agreeable to the blessed service of God. Amen.

‘Of three classes of men is made the fortune and the glory of this land, and in general of all lands not inhabited by savage or barbarous peoples.

‘First, those whose good will in dealing with their neighbours, whose hearts which love God and mankind, whose sense of right, and whose inclination to help others have blotted from their souls all passions and evil desires and whose lives have no substance save the reflection of their virtues. This class of men are saints.

‘The next are those who, by long study and experience and much fighting in their youth against Moors and bad Christians, and because God was pleased to distinguish them with this privilege, have been able to penetrate further than ordinary eyes into the inwardness of things and, feeling whiteness descend on their hair, for the honour of their sons and the arms they had won and with fiery love were able to set down in good rhetoric sacred hymns and profane songs and famous chronicles which the men of to-morrow can read for their edification. The first of these men is that King Alfonso X, named the Wise. And this class of men, which we shall call the second of those who make the nation in our land or in any other, is the class of poets.

‘Finally, the third sort of men necessary to establish our greatness is the class of those who seek out adventurous deeds

and the enemy's steel, to write with their blood, for so it can be said that many have done, the devices of their shields. These are heroes.

'The three sorts of men, then, most necessary to establish greatness are saints, poets, and heroes. A land can be very rich without these virtues but it will not achieve greatness. And God our Lord has not been chary in giving us in this land these three classes of men, for we have them at our side every day and we see them in their virtue, wisdom, and heroism, edifying us with their deeds. There are some who have more than one of these qualities, but it is enough for each of us to have one only, because if we possess it utterly, as God desires that men should possess things, then there can be no true poet without a touch of heroism and no true saint without a touch of the poet, nor, finally, any of the three without some of the virtues of the others.

'The first condition of the saint is to neglect everyday values for those whose home and splendour is found only in eternity. And this is also the condition of the hero. And of the poet. The first condition of the poet is truth and beauty, for which he will give his life if necessary, and this is the condition of the hero. The first condition of the hero is not to turn his face from danger but to advance on it with greater courage the greater it may be and the greater the glory of conquering or dying. In these qualities are also included beauty, truth, and the holiness of love for just causes. It cannot be said, then, that each quality exists separately from the others and is in and by itself sufficient for greatness, because if this were so some qualities could be opposed to others, which is impossible.

'And I say to you that in this castle of Sancho Garcés the hero is to be accounted first, and then, in the same place, the saint and the poet. And that on your heroism depends the careful stimulation and growth of the other virtues, for, however much some may tell you that they are qualities of peace, I tell you that they are also qualities of war, for war

is as it were the highest and bravest part of life, and in war these high qualities increase and are heightened, just as at the moment of greatest curvature of bow and crossbow all the qualities of wood and steel are put under tension and increased. And so I tell you, O my captains and knights, that the ordinances of this castle which follow must be impregnated with these sentiments and bring it to pass that our privileges won by long centuries of struggle must be regarded as such without pride, and that submission must be received without causing humiliation, and that our law must be like the law of saints and poets and heroes, stable and pleasing for the greater good of all men and for the greater good of our country and the service of God, and that all you who are high in fortune and courage and nobility shall keep in remembrance those words of Saint Paul where he says: "One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind . . . For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's." So we must all be, for perhaps God leads us along this path, toward the true glory of obtaining in this stronghold of Sancho Garcés some man who, reaching the highest state of the three virtues of heroism, holiness, and wisdom or poetry, will better the path of mankind as was done by Saint Paul, the Cid, or Alfonso X. Amen.'

No one had interrupted Mosén Joaquín. My sister Concha was yawning because at first she thought that the parchment would be like *Fabiola*, which she was reading and which related the loves of the Romans. My mother sent her to bed. There we remained — we men, and my mother, and the doctor's wife, all equally enthralled by the reading. I did not entirely understand it, but there were words like torches, and the document as a whole was as warming as the shepherd's wine. My father was the first to make a comment:

'What style!'

'You are right,' said Mosén Joaquín. 'The style in Latin can only be compared to certain of Seneca's epistles. My translation gives but a faint idea of it.'

'There are no such men in these days,' said the doctor's wife.

Her husband protested:

'Plenty of them — everywhere.'

My mother thought the same. She believed that the cultivation of the three virtues, rather than college educations, engineers, and economics, would restore Spain to greatness. The doctor did not believe that past greatness ever returns. He did not believe that anything that was really dead ought to return: If it had died, it was because its hour had come. 'But,' he added, 'true greatness never dies. The source of it continues in other channels.'

'In what channels?' my father asked.

The doctor gave an example. In this region, in these castles, the liberties of modern Europe were born. Here, and not in the French Revolution — which was only a small affair of bookish tradesmen. My father interrupted to declaim against the spirit which the diffusion of commerce — deceit, untruthfulness, lack of trust, the false honesty always based on repression — had brought in. The doctor listened carefully and said:

'Yes. But what are we to do?'

'You have just told us. The liberties of Europe were born in this country. While African barbarism was being held back, first here and later at sea — Lepanto — the parliaments of Aragon were laying down laws in which liberty was for the first time organized. Out of these parliaments were later born the idea of liberty in France, the old legislation of England. The relations of the nobility and the aristocracy with the people and the king. The statutes in which pure juridical entities were formed, independent of . . .,' he went on, but I was no longer listening.

Mosén Joaquín nodded his head as if he were in ecstasy:

‘Oh, if we would dare to be what we all, more or less, are within ourselves!’

‘What do you believe that we are?’ asked the doctor.

• ‘Heroes or saints or poets. Each of us is born with one of those seeds in his heart.’

I said that I wanted to tell them something very important that had happened in one of the outer castles, but that first I must ask a question.

‘What kind of a question?’ said my father, made wary by experience.

‘What does “bastard” mean?’

They explained as well as they could. I saw that there was some mystery about it into which I was not to inquire, and, not quite able to understand it, I began the story the shepherd had told me. When I came to the sentence: ‘Here within dwell six score sons of whores all ready to lay down their lives for you,’ they all burst out laughing except the ladies, whose reactions were very different. While my mother stared at me as if she had never seen me before, the doctor’s wife blushed and said:

‘Oh! . . .’

My father continued to laugh, but when everything was quiet again, he asked me, suddenly serious:

‘Where did you hear that?’

‘Someone told me.’

‘Who?’

I should have kept my secret, because it was not normal behaviour for me to tell everything that happened to me, but in the document that Mosén Joaquín had just read it said that the poet was a man of truth and beauty. I took this perfectly literally; so I told my story. Afterwards I added:

‘What were those men in the castle? Saints or poets or heroes?’

My father did not know what to answer:

'Poor unfortunates.'

'But they must have fought well.'

'Yes,' said my father, 'there are men without spirit who behave heroically or wisely or holily if those who guide them can inspire these things in them.'

My mother was still looking at me uncomprehendingly:

'This boy . . .'

'In that case,' I said, 'bastards are men without spirit, are they? A pity!'

'Why?'

'Because I should like to be a bastard.'

They decided to ignore me. Mosén Joaquín was the only one who looked me in the face, and now and again he rolled a little ball of bread across the tablecloth to me and I would send it back to him. However, I asked:

'Are six centuries much in the life of mankind?'

'No. They are nothing,' said the doctor.

'Well then, we are just the same as the people who built this castle, are we?'

'More or less.'

'And what are we, Papa? Are you a bastard?'

No one answered. They talked about something else. I considered myself half hero and half poet. I said so. The doctor and Mosén Joaquín looked at me sympathetically. My father took the map of our explorations from his pocket and spread it out. My mother asked again if the entrances to the vaults had been closed, and the doctor's wife seemed to be relieved too when we said yes. When the doctor heard about our discovery of the skeletons he remembered that he needed one for his study but that he had not dared to ask the gravedigger for one because his corpses were comparatively recent. 'One of those from down below would suit me,' he said. But he added that it must be 'perfectly clean'. I thought of the shepherd. I told the doctor that I knew someone who would clean it for him but that he would have to pay for it because the man was very poor.

'I'll give him fifteen pesetas, if he really cleans it properly for me.'

My mother was horrified again:

'Where do you pick up such acquaintances?'

I did not answer. The doctor, remembering the operation, said:

'He is really a brave boy.'

My father looked at the map. There was a gallery which protruded beyond the sketch and was prolonged to one side in an imaginary direction.

'And that gallery?' Mosén Joaquín asked.

'It has still to be explored. There are tombs on both sides.'

I broke in:

'It goes to the other castle. And the tombs too. And in the last tomb there is cold wine and if you drink it the lamias won't hurt you.'

'Bah! Wine in a tomb! What foolishness!'

They continued to pore over the map and wondered where the gallery which had been prolonged in an imaginary line really led. I wanted to speak, but my mother interrupted me:

'Are you going to tell us more nonsense? Be quiet.'

My father seemed to forget the map for a moment:

'If we were to remember those virtues, those ancient virtues . . .'

'I said before, Don José, that great things that have died ought not to be prolonged.'

'But you also said that true greatness never dies.'

'No.'

'Where is it to-day?'

The doctor tried to find examples. Finally he pointed his finger at me:

'Anywhere. Here, even. That boy is not contaminated yet. He would give his life to have a share in defending this country with the six score bastards in the castle.'

I could have hugged the doctor.

'Papa —' I said. 'Let me explore that gallery. All by myself.'

'Are you mad?'

'No. Let me do it alone.'

'When?'

'At once.'

'At night?'

'It is always night down there.'

'My son, you are afraid of the vaults. So much afraid that the vaults have become a hallucination with you. And you think that to explore an unknown underground passage is the most heroic thing in the world.'

Mosén Joaquín rose and retired to a sofa in the corner. He lighted a candle, took out his prayer book, and began to read vespers. When he rose, I had risen too, thinking that he wanted to speak to me privately, but when I saw him take out his book I returned to my chair, disappointed.

'Let me go to the vaults.'

The doctor was to stay for three days. They agreed to explore the new gallery to the end the following afternoon. They were undoubtedly incited by my forwardness.

'I believe,' I said, 'that the lamias sleep in there with their bears. By day they come out and haunt the woods. But I am not afraid of lamias.'

My father stood up, really angry at last, and ordered:

'To bed.'

I rose quietly and turned to the doctor:

'Do you want the skeleton?'

'Certainly, but you . . .'

'Pay no attention to him,' said my father.

And, soon after, he returned to the theme of past greatness. A man. If a man would appear who had all three qualities, like Philip II, like . . . The doctor stopped him:

'No, surely not he! I respect your opinion, but I don't believe that Philip II had one of those three qualities. Besides, the relations between nations, the relations between

interests, the ease of communication, the whole of modern life make an anachronism of any armed national enterprise, Conquest, Empire: anachronisms. But the old greatness goes on.'

'How?'

'We were once a strong people. A people of saints, heroes, and poets, as the document puts it. With power in our destiny to influence other peoples. We are still a strong people, Don José. We are not asleep. You will yet see one day how awake we are. But no people will again become great through arms.'

'Perhaps.'

'If yesterday Spanish Catholicism was able to conquer the world, to-day a new conception of humanity will arise among us too. That is to say, our empire can and should be spiritual. To-day's heroism does not consist in giving your life in the advance of a regiment. It was long ago that Gracián gave a definition of the hero which has more of the saint and the poet in it than of the hero. In the fight against darkness, through knowledge.'

'"The Mansions" of Santa Teresa,' said Mosén Joaquín from his corner.

'Yes. And men of science. To-day, in reality, holiness, wisdom, and heroism are one and the same thing. And from that substance, without arms or conquest of territory, the new empires will be made.'

The doctor's wife looked at him in ecstasy. She took advantage of a silence:

'Promise me,' she begged him, 'to give up your idea of having a skeleton.'

My father suggested playing ombre. A game was immediately arranged. Two women and two men. Mosén Joaquín remained in his corner with his book. My mother spread a green cloth on the table and brought the cards.

I went to sleep very late. I was trying to mature my plan for the following day. At first I actually thought seriously of

going to the vaults, but afterwards, when I was alone, I began to realize that if the idea had occurred to me before an audience it had really sprung from a desire to show off, and now going seemed a more difficult matter. Even so, I planned to explore the gallery the next day. My father had said that they would start in the afternoon. I would go to see the shepherd, and approximately at the time they were entering the gallery at one end I would enter it at the other. We would meet half-way; I would convince them that I had been right in saying that it connected with the other castle, that I was enough of a hero to perform the feat like a real 'bastard'. The word seemed to me to denote undisciplined but all-conquering heroism.

I X

I ROSE early, saw that the others were asleep, and went to the Romanesque fountain. There I wrote another letter to Valentina, in pencil. The corporal was going to town that day and would carry it.

'Here I am, and now it's no longer naval battles but subterranean ones with skeletons and hanged men. Everything has changed. Before you go to San Sebastian I want to tell you that there are lamias who ride on bears and have webbed feet like geese or cloven hoofs like goats. I know what you have to do so they won't do you any harm. Only I don't know whether their bears bite or not, but I'll find out soon because the shepherd will tell me.

'And I'll tell you what I am going to do this afternoon. But this, now, is something that grown-ups don't do because the shepherd himself doesn't dare to. I am going to explore the worst gallery all by myself, it is all black and long. It takes two hours to go through it and one castle connects with the

other. That is the truth. Don't be surprised if you find out that now I am a bastard.

'Before I begin this adventure I write to you so that you will know where I am and that I am your unforgettable Pepe. P.S. Leave this letter on a table somewhere so that your father will see it.'

Dinner was as ceremonious and complicated as supper had been and lasted terribly long. Unlike the previous evening, I said nothing. My father was surprised and asked the doctor whether my behaviour did not follow the pattern of some neurosis, because now I was bursting with things to say and now, without any apparent motive, I was as dumb as a statue.

'He is not so dumb,' said the doctor, 'because what he's doing is hatching some devilment.'

'Watch out,' said my father threateningly. 'Remember that it will take only one more drop to make the glass run over.'

'Let him alone, Don José.'

And he added casually:

'I'd be glad if I had a son like yours.'

'Don't say that twice, or I'll give him to you.'

Taking advantage of my elders' remaining at table to talk, and sure that they would begin to explore the last gallery about five o'clock (not before, for digestion's sake, and also because it was already late in the afternoon), I set out for the other castle. Nothing worth relating happened on the way. I heard a fox bark, but they are harmless animals. Not a lamia nor a bear appeared. I had the key and the leather purse at my side.

The shepherd was lying motionless, as always, with his body in the sun and his head in the shade.

'Didn't anything happen to you yesterday?'

'You can see for yourself.'

'I'm glad.'

'Give me a little cold wine.'

'Won't you get too fond of it, young man?'

'Me? Give me some.'

'It's inside there. Go and get it.'

'Haven't you the little bottle out here?'

'I had, but it got warm and I put it inside again. Go and get it.'

I vanished into the shrubbery, walked around a boulder, dropped down on all fours, and disappeared into the cave. I looked for the wine bag in the tomb without finding it, and when I turned back I saw it near the entrance, on the ground.

I had my flashlight with me, and flashed it into the shadows. The light disclosed new tombs on both sides and the gallery running straight on out of sight. It was already about five o'clock. Perhaps my father and his guests had entered the opposite end. I came out and drank a deep draught. 'Against the lamias,' I thought; and, remembering my doubts about the bears, I asked the shepherd whether lamias' bears would bite people who were immune from lamias.

'The bears only do what the lamias tell them to,' the shepherd said.

Well, so much the better. Then I told him that I had kept him in mind and that if he wanted to earn fifteen pesetas he had only to get a whole skeleton and clean it and take it to the castle within two days, because after that the doctor would be gone. The shepherd shook his head:

'That's as much as I earn in three months. That and my bread and wine and oil. But I say no. Tell the doctor no.'

'Why?'

'Because I say no. It's like the barber in my village who said to me one day, "Bring me a mountain goat after he has shed. Bring me one, and I'll give you two pesetas." "What do you want one for?" I asked. "To make me a good brush out of the hair that grows on his chin." But a mountain goat has to have a beard on his chin, and so does a man. The only use

for barbers is to put on leeches when someone is really dying.'

'But this is different.'

'Why?'

'Because it's for science.'

'Ah —' He remained in meditation for a moment and then said: 'No. The dead in their graves. May they sleep in peace. And the mountain goat in the woods.'

'The dead would be glad to be able to help the living.'

'They help already. They help quite enough. And tell anyone who doesn't believe it to come and ask me.'

He began to say that the spring of medicinal water where people were cured of anaemia passed through two old graveyards and received the water that filtered from another. 'The dead wash themselves well, and then those who don't want to die drink the water. And they get rosy and fat.'

'All right. But if you don't want to, I'll ask someone else.'

'And besides,' the shepherd said, 'it has to be well cleaned, and I don't know how to do that.'

I dropped the subject, drank a little more wine, and asked if it was five o'clock yet. He looked at the shadow of a tree and said:

'It's already a handbreadth after five.'

'Good-bye, then.'

I dived into the shrubbery again, went round the boulder, and entered the gallery. I turned on my flashlight. There were places in the wall which sparkled under the light. Perhaps fragments of quartz. At the start, under my first impulse, I went about a hundred yards without pausing. Then I noticed that the gallery was descending and I began to wonder whether the shepherd was right, whether it would lead me to hell, but it began running upward again and continued in a gentle slope. 'Now it is heading for the castle,' I said to myself. I began to sing in time to my steps:

'For you, for you,
Turtledove and turtle true.'

But I read my own fear in the sound of my voice. I did not sing after that. From time to time, feeling the wine in my veins, I cried impetuously into the shadows:

'Hah, I am a son of a whore too!'

I knew that the word 'whore' was improper, but I did not really understand what it meant and it did not sound badly among men. Besides, I wanted at any price to be one of those six score who loved their father as little as I and defended him perhaps only to humiliate him. Because I began to see that, among other things, 'to be a bastard' meant 'to hate your father'. I advanced with more courage and felt the beneficent influence of the wine in each beat of my pulse. I turned to look back and could no longer see the rocks at the entrance. Without realizing it, I had gone round a turn and the gallery stretched away in a gentle curve bordered by tombs and vaults. I went on, looking at nothing but the farther end of the space which my flashlight illuminated. It was all the same, and now I saw my tranquillity as a spectacle which gave me a superior idea of myself. Farther ahead I heard a noise of suppressed laughter and breathing: 'It's the lamias.' And I went resolutely forward; knowing that they could not harm me. There were no lamias; the sounds were produced by trickling water. The paving seemed to be covered with water. And I had to go through it, wetting my feet over my ankles. When I reached the other side where the footing was dry again I had the feeling that the flow might increase and that the water would prevent me from returning if any unforeseen encounter should make a retreat advisable. I shut my eyes and went on. I realized that I had made the better part of the journey with my eyes shut. I opened them then and walked on, but thinking that I had gone far enough, I shouted so that my father, who surely was not far away, should hear me:

'Papa!'

The last echo sounded very far away. I thought that one of the echoes was my father's voice or the doctor's. I went

on, feeling more sure of myself. I looked around, hemmed in by tombs on either side, and went thoughtfully on again, conferring a different title on each tomb as I passed it, repeating the classes of the parchment: 'Hero, saint, poet, hero, saint, poet, hero, saint . . .'

This occupation distracted me. And so I advanced for more than half an hour. I was a hero too, and I was alive. A poet and alive. Sainthood I did not dare to think about, for I had never heard of a saint who secreted pistols, still less of one who stuck daggers into mattresses. And I was so tranquil that I could remember such things. Again I heard a distant sound of laughter. 'Water,' I thought, not too certain; but just as I came near enough to find out, my flashlight began to flicker. It was going out. I imagined that it would not last long enough for me to return and decided that the best thing was to go ahead as fast as possible, calling to Mosén Joaquín instead of to my father. I began to run, but stopped, because when I ran I felt afraid. I held myself to a fast walk.

'Mosén Joaquín!'

This time there was only one echo, and it answered clearly with the last syllable I had uttered: ' . . . quín!'

'Ah, it was an echo the time before too.'

I had not considered that my flashlight batteries might fail, but the beam now penetrated only a yard ahead. Ten more steps and it would go out. I dropped it on the paving, producing a noise that reverberated in the profound blackness, and leaned against the wall. Keeping one hand on it, I resumed my advance. I felt that I still had courage, but it was an empty courage, beyond consciousness. I walked on, touching the wall. I knew that the galleries were not obstructed and that I should not encounter danger, but from time to time I heard my feet knock something aside with a light, dull sound.

'Bones.'

I went on, but the wall ended. My hand groped in the air. 'It makes a turn here,' I thought, and felt the hair rise

on my neck. I followed the curve of the wall and realized that I was entering another chamber. It was useless to hope to get my bearings myself. However, my will was strong, it acted beyond consciousness, as the will must do in madmen, and, as in them, with no concrete purpose. I stumbled over something and saw that it was a stone step. It was clean, very cold, and very damp. I sat down on it, put my head between my hands, shut my eyes, and cried:

‘Valentina!’

A multitude of echoes returned upon me from the very vaults of the chamber in which I sat. I decided to remain there and wait. I closed my eyes and opened them again, but it was all the same. I felt neither my body, the stone step, nor my hands on my knees. Anything could happen, and I waited only for what really was to happen and to know whether it would be favourable or adverse. Fear? I was living in fear, I breathed fear, fear sustained me. In front of me the shadows, in which I could dimly distinguish outlines, began to move.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I came because I am a bastard.’

Above the shadow, higher than the head of an ordinary man, I could see a warrior’s helmet, faintly illuminated. It was copper red, black, and white. I have never known whether I really spoke and was really answered, because the dialogue proceeded without words. I knew what the other felt, and he knew what I was feeling and said:

‘Ah, what a struggle!’

‘Why?’

‘I am a bastard, too. Sancho Garcés was a criminal and sent me down here, and since then I have not been able to get out. I felt a blow between my shoulders, and I have not been able to see the light of day since. Help me to get out.’

‘Do you know the way?’

‘Yes, but you must take my hand. If not, I will not go.’

I stood up and gave him my hand. I could feel nothing, but the shadow said:

‘Go first and lead me.’

I obeyed, but came up against the wall.

‘If I have to go first and don’t know the way — how can I?’

‘Go straight ahead now. I’ll tell you the way.’

As soon as I took his hand I began to hear the ring of iron everywhere, particularly one sustained sound as if someone were reshaping the point of his lance on an anvil with a hammer. So much noise prevented me from hearing the shadow, who was talking to himself, or to someone else:

‘I did not flee. O God, I did not flee, and I have to pay for him.’

The voice was barely audible. I dropped his hand and all was still. But I was in the gallery again and had reached the farther side of the chamber. Sure that the wall would not fail me now, I went on. ‘Where could that man have gone? And who was he?’

I heard footsteps behind me.

‘Don’t run away.’

I gave a shriek. The words reminded me that I was surrounded by terrible things from which I must flee. ‘Don’t run away.’

‘Don’t be afraid. Give me your hand and don’t be afraid.’

It was the same shadow, the helmet still faintly luminous. The rest was invisible. I gave him my hand.

‘Are you a hero?’ I asked. ‘Or a saint, or a poet?’

‘I am only a poor mortal. We are all poor mortals — here, and up above.’

‘I don’t believe that is how a hero talks. But are you a poet?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘A saint?’

‘Where are the saints? Golden crucifixes, golden chasubles, golden censers, golden mitres. Where are the saints?’

‘Where are we going?’

'Forward. Go forward. I made saints. A few saints. I was not a hero or a saint. Perhaps a poet. But I made statues when I was too old to fight. I made the Virgin of Sancho Garcés. And people began to say that a bird had brought her image, and when everyone said that a bird had brought it I believed it too. But I had made it, and then the Virgin began to perform miracles, and people said: "A bird brought it, and it has given us victory. A bird brought it, and it cured my wounds. A bird brought it, and it saved my mother's life." Then they began saying that it was not a bird but an angel. Everyone said that it came through the air in the hands of an angel, and I believed it too, but even though I believed it I was sent down here and one day I felt a blow between my shoulders. Probably they wanted to kill me, but they did not succeed. And here I am; here I am, and I cannot get out.'

'Mightn't it be that they really killed you?'

'Killed me?'

'Yes.'

'Me?'

He vanished again, but this time did not return. I called to him but he did not come. I decided to go on, but I stumbled again and this time fell. I did not have the heart to get up, but not through fear, because I was in the midst of fear, I lived on it, breathed it, it pulsed in my temples. Other shadows swayed before me. They bore something luminous too, but it was not a helmet. It was a nightcap and a feather.

I do not know whether I asked or was asked:

'Who are you?'

I answered, on the chance:

'A heroic bastard.'

Now I could see that the speaker was not the shape with the feather, but another shorter figure before him. Little by little light fell on him from in front, and I was able to make out the black cowl of a monk dressed in white. His face I did not see. I never saw the faces of these apparitions. The

monk was not as short as he had appeared at first, but bent. Old and bent. The monk spoke:

'They tell me that I am a saint and venerated on altars.'

'And what are you doing here?'

'Six hundred years have passed since I was sent down here because Sancho Garcés favoured the Knights Templar. They put my head and my legs in the stocks, and after a while I heard footsteps behind me. I thought they had come to feed the hawks which were perched in a corner with their heads hooded in cloth, but I felt a blow from a mace on my head, and since then I have known nothing until now, when I see you before me. Who are you?'

I told him who I was.

'Who rules the castle?'

'A Garcés?'

'Templars still?'

'No. Only Mosén Joaquín.'

'Tell your father how it happened. I was fastened head and foot in the stocks without having been accused of anything.'

'And they hit you with a mace and killed you, didn't they?'

The monk did not answer; his shadow slowly vanished amid the singing of seraphim. I sat on the ground, entranced by their music, and I do not know how long I remained there.

Finally I went on and traversed a considerable distance without seeing or hearing anything. But I found myself in an obstructed gallery. I would have to climb a series of ledges and let myself drop on the other side, but I was afraid to drop in the darkness. I sat down and stared fixedly into the shadows. Fixedly, without winking, as I had done before. The first thing I heard was someone panting with effort.

'To the postern,' he said. 'Everyone to the postern!'

I saw a helmet with the visor down become luminous.

'Who are you?'

Suddenly there was silence. Then I heard a distant voice, which, however, came from beside me:

'Is there anyone here?'

'Yes, I. And you? Are you a hero?'

'Yes, so they say.'

'What are you doing here?'

'I am imprisoned. I am imprisoned and asleep. They could only have taken me asleep, my brother and my mother. I had spent twenty years fighting Sancho Garcés' men from the castle of Ejea. Wherever I fell on them, nothing remained but the memory of terror. But always in honourable Christian fashion. And to make peace with the lord of this castle, they decided to give me up. They waited until the sleeping potion had put me to sleep, and then they left me to Sancho Garcés' men, and they brought me here asleep.'

He removed his helmet, and I saw his shoulder and his headless neck appear beneath it.

'Did they cut off your head while you were asleep?'

The shadow vanished.

'Good!' I said to myself. 'They killed the saint, they killed the poet, they killed the hero. I am a bastard, a hero, and a poet. Will they kill me? Even if they kill me, I am not afraid.'

I climbed the mound and went carefully down the opposite side. When I felt the pavement under my feet I let myself drop. And I went on through the gallery again in the darkness.

I became aware that I was carrying something. And at the same moment that I discovered that I was carrying three human skulls — two between my left forearm and my chest, and a third hanging by an eye socket from the fingers of my left hand — I said:

'The head of the hero, the head of the saint, the head of the poet.'

I no longer expected anyone. Neither my father nor Mosén Joaquin. I was ready to remain there forever. Again

I heard the sound of laughter, but I identified it as running water without investigating it. All I remembered was that it was Sunday. That fact had some relation to Mosén Joaquín's presence in the castle, but I could not remember exactly who Mosén Joaquín was.

Another shadow took shape before me. It was a very fat monk, who laughed and repeated:

'He, he, he, he! Good goat cheese. Good blood of our Lord in a Moorish jar.'

'Go away!' I cried.

'He, he, he! Wine in the Mass is the blood of our Lord. That is a poor honour for such rich wine. He, he, he, he!'

The fat monk lifted his frock and danced with his bare shanks:

'Good goat cheese.'

'Let me pass, imbecile!'

'Who are you, lad? He, he, he!'

'And you?'

'I? The brother cellarer, the only person in the castle who died because God willed it — died a natural death, I mean, from indigestion. And you, lad? Who are you?'

'A hero. A bastard hero.'

'Hero, saint, or poet . . . he, he, he! There are many here, and their heads fell one after the other, before they were ripe. I am the only one who died when his hour came.' I pushed forward, but I passed easily through his shadow. I heard him laughing and dancing behind me. He did not molest me. From a long way off I could still hear him:

'He, he, he . . .'

He seemed to be laughing at me, but I felt so strong that nothing could make any impression on me. Something like a snake hung against the wall, but it was so long that it could not be a snake. I leaned over to touch it and realized that it was a rope. As I touched it, I felt a strange certainty:

'A gallows rope. If I cut it, the pieces will turn into snakes.'

I felt frightened at the idea of snakes upright on their tails, dancing as I had seen them in the woods.'

Far away at the end of the gallery I saw light. 'What shadows will come now? More warriors, more saints, more poets? Perhaps executioners, coming for me.' I approached and, when I least expected it, I heard familiar voices. Familiar voices together. My father, the doctor, Mosén Joaquín. And others. Perhaps others. I looked around, trying to find a way to escape. This was really horrible. The gallery was not intersected by any other. And they would see me with my three skulls. But . . . was I carrying three skulls?

I gave a scream and fell unconscious.

Among the group of explorers was Don Arturo, who had come to spend Sunday at the castle, and Valentina. They had been travelling through the gallery for over half an hour, keeping up their spirits with talk on indifferent subjects. But when they heard my scream and the sound of a falling body, they stopped dead. Don Arturo could not control himself, and ran. The doctor tried to master himself, shouting:

'That was a human voice!'

They made no move to advance. I gave a long groan. Valentina shrieked:

'Oh, God, it's what I thought. That is Pepe!'

She reached gropingly into the shadows and found an extinguished lantern. There was another that was still alight, but the corporal would not let it out of his hands.

Mosén Joaquín came up with a burning cigar lighter. Valentina took the lantern. Mosén Joaquín tried to trap her, saying:

'Come here.'

But she would not:

'That is Pepe! Oh, God, it's just what I thought.'

She escaped him and came running toward me. It appears that it was Don Arturo who had raised the alarm and broken up the group. Mosén Joaquín limped along behind Valen-

tina, but seeing that he could not keep up with her, he turned back to tell her father.

I came to myself with a bright light in my eyes and Valentina's hands on my face. It took me a little time to get things clear. Finally I rose up. I kissed Valentina, and she told me how they had left home, how she had arrived, how my father had thought of inviting her to come down into the vaults.

'Are they here?' I said, terrified.

'Yes.'

'Here?' I insisted.

'Yes.'

Oh, that could not be! Valentina encouraged me:

'Let's go somewhere else.'

I walked away, leading Valentina by the hand. She still had the lantern. I dallied a little, wanting to pick up the three skulls, but I could not find them anywhere. Had I really been carrying three skulls?

Valentina, seeing the sureness with which I retraced my road, was much pleased:

'You know all the underground passages in the world.'

We heard voices behind us. The party was advancing, calling our names. We began to run. We soon came to the place where the trickling water covered the width of the gallery. Valentina said that she could cross, but I made her put her arms round my neck — with the lantern over my shoulder — and picked her up under the knees, holding her tightly against me. Her skin felt warm, or perhaps my hand was unusually cold. Before I let her down on the other side we kissed each other many times.

And we reached the end of our journey without further accidents.

I had looked in vain for the shadows I had seen before. I began telling Valentina what had happened to me, but I could not remember it exactly, and all that I knew was that heroes, saints, and poets were all treacherously slain in the castle.

WE emerged and found the shepherd beside a great cauldron of boiling water. He was keeping up a wood fire under it, and from time to time he took up his crook and slowly — respectfully, you might say — stirred round the body of an old woman. I prevented Valentina from seeing it. The shepherd looked at us uncomprehendingly but without too much surprise:

‘Are you sure he will give me the fifteen pesetas?’

I said yes, and without warning him that others would be coming out of the gallery or answering his questions about Valentina (he kept looking at her feet) we went slowly off in the direction of the castle. Valentina had not seen what was in the cauldron. Later I learned that the excursionists had reached the entrance to the gallery and that the corporal had enlarged the opening with his pick until it was high enough for them to pass through without going down on their hands and knees. The shepherd, hearing someone digging his way out of the gallery, went round to the other side of the castle. And when they all emerged and discovered the abandoned cauldron in which a half-disintegrated human body was boiling, they retreated with very different feelings. Mosén Joaquín took out his prayer book, the doctor put on his spectacles with shaking hands. My father looked cautiously round, and after a long silence during which each felt that he was the victim of a bad dream, the notary stammered:

‘We must draw up a deposition.’

But first they must commend the poor human victim to God and put out the fire. The corporal pulled the burning logs apart and trampled them or threw earth on them. And when the notary, who saw that Mosén Joaquín’s prayers were coming to an end, produced a piece of paper to draw up the deposition, my father exclaimed:

‘I could never have believed it!’

Opinion was divided. The cauldron — it seemed rather to

be an attempt to dispose of the corpus delicti than to point to cannibalism. A murder. Don Arturo wrote on his knee: 'On such and such a day of such and such a month in the environs of . . .'

'Is this the township of Ejea de los Caballeros?' he asked in a trembling voice.

But, seeing the fire being pulled apart, the shepherd came running:

'Hey, what are you doing?'

They all looked at him in silence. The shepherd pointed to the cauldron and said:

'She doesn't want to let go of her skin, damn her.'

Night was falling, and Valentina and I walked on toward the castle with the lighted lantern. I was carrying it now, and the flame attracted dragonflies, moths, and other insects; they fluttered round it in crazy circles. I held the lantern away from my body, so that they could pass round it without hitting me, but a few moths lighted on my hand and my bare forearm, and I said that they tickled. Valentina wanted to feel them too, so I had to lend her the lantern. We did not put it out because it would soon be dark and we would need it then, and besides, we had no matches to light it with.

Far off behind the castle of Sancho Garcés the sun was setting in a splendour of greens and golds. Such a variety of light intoxicated me after the darkness of the vaults. We talked. It seemed as though we had always been walking toward a castle like this, talking and carrying a lighted lantern.

'Did you have to fight with the dead?' she asked.

'Yes. And they had me surrounded once, in the ring, in the ring of cinnamon-bread.'

'Did you kill many of them?'

The problem of killing dead men was one that I had not had to face before:

'I routed them, and when I pulled their skulls off they fell down. But finally there were too many of them.'

'Did they conquer you?'

'Not really. I only fainted.'

We were walking hand in hand. Valentina gave little cries of alarm when a moth clung too tightly to her bare arm, and ended by giving me back the lantern.

'Insects frighten me,' she explained, 'all except crickets.'

We were in so little of a hurry to reach the castle and be back among grown-ups that we sat down at the foot of a tree, setting the lantern beside us. Yes, Valentina was all made of amber now. And she, in turn, told me that I 'seemed to have a light inside me'. And we kissed many times, and we lay down side by side, and she put her head on my chest as if she were going to sleep. The lantern stood beside us, still alight. And Valentina cried, and I wanted to be brave, but I felt my throat tighten too and my eyes filled with tears. We cried in silence, without knowing why. And crying and kissing each other, we fell asleep. I dreamed that Valentina and I had lost our bodies and were made of crystal. We were flying through the air, which was made of amber, like Valentina's thighs, and I heard the brother cellarer call:

'He, he, he! A bit of good goat cheese for me!'

And I was going to be killed but Valentina would not leave me and someone said:

'All right, in a minute we'll kill them both, because she is a heroine too.'

They were going to kill us, but it did not matter. Where they were going to kill us there were flowers and music. But it was the monk with his frock pulled up, dancing and saying:

'I was only a lay brother, but I studied for the priesthood in my pantry. All my life long, I studied: *Rosa, rosae, Musa, musae*, and all the real priests made fun of me. And I ate my bit of cheese and drank the blood of Christ.'

Two men who appeared to be executioners were laughing at the monk, but he suddenly became serious and said, pointing to Valentina:

'She is a heroine too, for I saw her.'

'We knew she was a heroine,' I answered, 'everyone knows it. And now they are going to kill her, and me too.'

The monk was satisfied and made ready to dance again, affirming:

'Oh, all right. In that case . . .'

Someone shook us violently, but we would not be separated. My father, Don Arturo, Mosén Joaquín, the doctor — they were all there. The light of our lantern had guided them. And Mosén Joaquín kept saying:

'You'll catch cold, children.'

'No, no, no!' cried Valentina, who was still asleep.

'Eh?' said the doctor.

I was not awake yet, either.

'If they come to kill us . . .'

'Eh? Who?'

At last they woke us. The doctor treated us affably, but all the others seemed cross. I do not clearly remember what happened then, but I know that we arrived at the castle like criminals. It was all so disagreeable that before I went off to bed I shouted at my father and Don Arturo:

'You can say what you like now, but if it wasn't for Valentina you would have left me there.'

My father asserted that they had gone to look for me and spoke to the doctor about my strange behaviour. The doctor paid no attention to him, though he was really perplexed. Don Arturo, whom Valentina was trying to win over by sweetness, seemed to be angry with everyone. My mother walked up and down, saying to the doctor's wife:

'He's not my son. He's a changeling.'

Everyone was in consternation except Maruja, who finally went over to Valentina:

'I have only one thing to say: if you marry Pepe, I'll be sorry for you.'

Valentina did not know what to answer, and blushed. Later she went away without my being able to say good-bye

to her. I have not yet forgiven Don Arturo and my father for that. Mosén Joaquín before he left brought a grammar to my room and said:

‘Read that over, for next month we shall have to pass more examinations.’

He winked at me. He did not take Spanish grammar very seriously either, because we both knew a good deal of Latin grammar. Besides, it was not certain that we should go to Zaragoza in September, because the subjects in which I was to be examined perhaps weren’t worth making the journey, and I had already suggested to my father that we could leave them over until the following term.

I thought of the vaults, and felt that I wanted to go back, but . . . why? If Valentina could not come to save me again, dead men and monks and lamias lost their interest for me. And Valentina — this idea obsessed me — was going to San Sebastián three days later, with her parents and her sister — her hateful sister.

My father ignored me. He was convinced that there was something wrong with me, despite all the doctor’s assurances. The vaults remained closed, and my father said that he would notify the Provincial Museum so that they could take charge of the contents.

Sometimes my father looked at me as if I were a monster and said:

‘I cannot understand what is happening to you. If you go on in this way and the inevitable results follow, no one will talk about anything but you.’

And one day I answered him sourly:

‘I don’t want anyone to talk about me. What I want is to be left in peace?’

I wrote a long letter to Valentina, but she did not receive it. They had already left. She wrote me a letter, but her father intercepted it. I was in despair, but I felt myself more of a bastard than ever.

One day before we returned home, my father called me to

him and asked me to tell him what had happened in the vaults, and how I had entered them and why I had gone alone and without any light. This time I explained everything, including the monk, the warrior, and the poet who was also a sculptor. Naturally, my father stared at me more perplexed than ever. But if he could accept nothing of what I had said, he had to accept the cauldron with the human body boiling in it. Starting from there, the rest became credible. Finally, when my father seemed to be in the greatest despair, I insisted that if it had not been for Valentina my own body would be rotting in the vaults too.

‘Why?’ said my father, yellow with rage.

‘Because the rest of you were terrified when you heard me scream and ran away.’

‘That’s a lie,’ my father stuttered. ‘Some of us were frightened, but not all of us.’

‘All of you. All of you except Valentina.’

My father looked for words, which he could not find. He finally burst out:

‘If I hear you say that again, you’ll go to a house of correction.’

Ah, I could not endure that. And in this state of passion and rancour we returned to town and there met again in fresh encounters. But Valentina was away, and in my first days of rage I wept:

‘Valentina saved my life, and now they separate us.’

Little by little I became aware again of the realities that surrounded me. I realized at once that I had lost my leadership over the boys of the allied gang, and that my own gang was being terrorized by Carrasco. Carrasco appeared on the wall and, biting his finger, grunted disrespectfully:

‘Little Master — is back from his vacation.’

My courage had been too well proved for me to notice such provocations. But Carrasco repeated, as he had in the good old days, that he had dug my grave and that one day he would bury me in it. I wondered once if it might be true.

My destiny as a hero and a poet was to die, but it was not any Carrasco who would kill me, but executioners with arms of steel in the dark cellars of the castle, while fat brother cellarers danced.

After her vacation in San Sebastián, Valentina had gone to Bilbao to stay with her aunts for a couple of months. Her aunts were to come to our town for Christmas, and would bring Valentina back with them. I saw a manœuvre against me in this arrangement. I tried in various ways to find out Valentina's address, and one day when I saw her mother in my house — on a formal visit, in the drawing-room — I went to her and asked her. She gave it to me and stroked my hair. Ah, she understood us! She was the only person who understood us. Then she said with a sigh:

'Oh, Pepe! If you could only be like this all your life . . . But later, when you grow up, you'll be a man just like all the others.'

My mother did not understand her, and discussing it later with my sister Concha — who was beginning to be her confidante — she said that Doña Julia probably felt that her marriage was a failure.

I sent Valentina forty pages of the 'Universiad' and a letter in which I praised her mother's good qualities and thoroughly vilified her father. To mail it, I had to steal almost all the stamps in the library.

I remember that the following day some other boys and I performed an experiment that we repeated from time to time. We caught a live bat and undertook to burn its nose, expecting to hear it utter oaths and dirty words. Although the poor beast only shrieked and whimpered, we all believed that we had heard them. When I told someone about it he remembered similar experiments in which he had heard the bat cry out filth and blasphemies. Neither he nor I was lying. We were certain that we had heard them.

That same day when I left the house I found Carrasco waiting for me on the corner. He snarled more than ever,

but I passed without looking at him and he did not dare to attack me. However, he muttered:

‘You’re brave with skulls, but not with me!’

What had he heard about skulls? Perhaps it had become known in the town? The day was one of the coldest we had had that autumn. When night fell the wind that arose announced the first snowfall in the mountains. And I walked home disgusted and dissatisfied, repeating a stanza I liked from a new poem I had written for Valentina — with help from Horace — and which my sister Concha, to whom I showed what I wrote, thought magnificent. The poem referred to the ‘cave obscure where heroes die’, but I was saved by a line from the Latin poet: ‘from goodness’ hand to a new harmony’. Naturally, when I took something from Horace I did not feel obliged to admit it.

X I

THEN an incident occurred. The following day Clara came for her pension, but she did not come alone. With her arrived, timidly, a widow fifty years of age. When Clara’s voice was heard downstairs we children came to watch until my mother sent us away. This time Clara’s voice was loud, but it was not raised against us but against her neighbour:

‘North wind! North cold! North Christ!’ she was screaming.

Her neighbour asserted that she did not want to cause any trouble and that the whole commotion had arisen quite against her will. She would not even have come.

My mother asked them in, which seemed to please Clara greatly. The widow knotted her kerchief under her chin. My mother asked her:

‘Aren’t you Señora Rita?’

‘Widow of Agustín the younger, at your service.’

‘Widow, widow! Six months you were married,’ Clara grumbled. ‘That’s a marriage for you! Six months!’

‘And three years acquainted before it,’ the widow added, knotting her kerchief again.

They had brought a serious case which they wanted my father to judge, but my father was not at home. In his absence they confided in my mother. The widow had been married at twenty; she was now fifty. Six months after the wedding her husband had died of pneumonia. The widow shut herself up in her house and made her living by sewing. She did not go out, she gave no occasion for scandal. Her balcony door was always closed. She lived next door to Clara in a house whose roof was somewhat higher than hers. And for almost thirty years, whenever she believed a north wind was blowing, the widow would take her husband’s clothes out of the closet and hang them on the terrace on her roof to air. Each time she filled her terrace with the clothes of her deceased husband they cast a shadow on the terrace of her neighbour which the latter maintained was prejudicial to her own freshly washed underclothes. Clara said that her clothes must dry in the sun to bleach. At first she had complained only of being deprived of sunlight. Now she insisted that this shadow of the deceased brought bad luck into her life of single blessedness. The outer habiliments of the deceased and Clara’s underclothes had produced a conflict which, in the course of years, came to a head: Clara had climbed on to her neighbour’s terrace, had thrown the clothes of the deceased into the court, and had scratched his widow. The latter held that she had a right to air her husband’s clothes when there was a ‘north wind’. Clara complained that the widow said that there was a ‘north wind’ every three or four days and cast an ‘evil shadow’ on her petticoats. The argument grew heated. My mother tried to pacify them, but she could not. And since my father was not at home — he knew the law and would have settled the

matter — the conflict waxed. 'North wind, north wind,' Clara insisted. 'Six months you were married, and all that north wind!' It looked as though my mother would be overwhelmed by the storm, when Aunt Ignacia arrived.

'Well, well,' she said. 'I never saw the equal of this. So much noise over a pair of empty trousers!'

'I haven't said anything,' the widow excused herself.

Aunt Ignacia turned to Clara:

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Coming here to bother us with such nonsense!'

'Eh?' said Clara doubtfully, feeling that she was no match for Aunt Ignacia.

'Run along with you now! And you,' she said to the widow, who was sobbing, 'don't spend your life sniffing the air to see if the wind is from the north or not. There's no husband in your husband's clothes — may he rest in peace!'

When Clara reached the door, to which Aunt Ignacia had pushed them, she seemed to want to begin again, but Aunt Ignacia would not let her:

'Be off with you, and don't come here with your stories, because I can say "God" and "Christ" too.'

My mother disappeared into the hall, laughing. Aunt Ignacia went downstairs to make sure that the two women had reached the street.

This incident gave me something new to think about. The widow, enslaved all her life to one memory, and Aunt Ignacia's allusion to 'empty trousers', gave me the idea that there was a tremendous mystery in a man. I was the lord of love, but the mystery was something else, and I did not connect it with Valentina. It was something else of which I was ignorant. I went to my mother. For the first time she saw me almost docile.

'Mamma,' I said, when I had made sure that we were alone, 'tell me the truth'.

'What do you want, my son?'

My mother was delighted to see me so much the little boy that it pleased her to imagine me.

'Am I,' I asked, 'what they call a "handsome man"?'

'In the first place, you are not a man but a boy.'

'But will I be a handsome man?'

'I don't think so. No one could say that you are a handsome boy, either. No, you will not be handsome.'

'Then won't people love me?'

'Who?'

'My wife.'

My mother answered very gravely, taking both my hands:

'Look, Pepe. You will never be handsome. But to make up for it you will be something else. You will be one of those men who please all women.'

She said it with such certainty and pressed my hands so sweetly — the latter was the more persuasive — that I felt convinced.

I started to my room. I had just given way to a tremendous weakness, but no one had witnessed it. And perhaps my mother would not tell anyone. Just in case, I returned to her side and begged her to keep our conversation secret. She wanted to embrace me, but I struggled away, saying:

'Enough!'

I escaped at last, much pleased that she had wanted to embrace me. I went into the street. When I returned it was almost dark. At the corner, the gas flame of an early street lamp was flickering in the icy wind. And there under the street lamp was an old beggar with his stockingless feet in an enormous pair of boots. The old man had a scanty white beard. He leaned against the wall, weeping silently. I went over to him, impressed:

'What is the matter, good man?'

Then I saw that he was blind and was holding a piece of cord in his hand. His dog had been stolen, someone had cut the cord, and now he was perfectly helpless. He had just finished telling me, when I heard Carrasco snarling on the

other side of the street. I had an inspiration which told me that he had done it, and I was right. But for the moment I preferred to pretend not to know.

'Where did you want to go?'

'To shelter in a cave I know beyond town, on the other side.'

I knew the caves. I knew the outskirts of the town well. And Carrasco had done it.

'Lean on my shoulder and come along. Don't worry. I'll lead you.'

The beggar, still crying, put his hand on my shoulder. We set off, walking slowly. Carrasco jumped up and down on the opposite sidewalk like a demon:

'Little Master — is going to be a blind man's boy. Little Master — is going to be a blind man's boy.'

We crossed the town. I could perhaps have offered the blind man a night's shelter in my own home, where there were empty haylofts and coach-houses, but I knew better, because on the occasions when I had tried it, and once when I had actually done it clandestinely, it had cost me reprimands and punishments. I did not want any more trouble, but the trouble I got into proved to be tremendous.

People who saw us pass crossed themselves, unable to believe their eyes. I walked firmly and gravely along, listening to the poor old man's litany of thanks. He had stopped crying; now he sighed and said: 'I wish — God willing — I could get Pinto back!' He was a dog who, the old man told me, knew the houses where alms were given, and the caves which afforded shelter from the wind.

In this manner we traversed the centre of town and entered the outskirts. The old man walked very slowly, and it took us a long time. Once at our destination, I had to go back to one of the first houses to ask for matches to light a fire, because the poor old man was stiff with cold. When I related what had happened some peasant woman gave me raw potatoes and ends of bread, and one of them called me back after I had

started away to give me a paper of salt. The others looked at me and said:

'Isn't he the heir to Garcés?'

'Heir!' I answered. 'There's nothing to inherit there but bad debts!'

Some of them laughed, and others crossed themselves.

I stayed in the cave for some time, showing the beggar where to step without burning his feet, where he could find the potatoes, which were roasting in the hot ashes, and so on . . . and once again the whole town was mobilized to search for me. It was very late before I had finished, and when I returned about midnight, crossing the Plaza of the Three Crosses — there, on the top step of the stone platform beside one of them (for there really were three) stood Carrasco. He had followed us all the way.

'I've buried the beggar's dog in your grave, and I'll bury you there too.'

This was too much. I rushed at him. Luckily, only that morning I had roughened the soles of my boots with the kitchen grater, a necessary precaution against slipping on stones in case of a fight, and the moon shone down on the most ferocious combat between boys of which any record remains. We rolled over three times, four times, clinched, Carrasco digging the fingernails of one hand into my cheek and I holding his head back by the hair and hitting him on the nose, on the mouth. When he saw that he was lost, being unable to roll me over again, he used his free hand to tear my clothes. This was the last resource of cowards — to make sure, when they could not hurt us themselves, that we would be chastised later at home. But I was bleeding too, from my cheek and my neck.

People came running, and seeing me, and seeing me covered with blood, they wanted to carry me home. I objected, and unthinkingly gave Carrasco a kick in the chest which made him pirouette most amusingly in an effort to keep his feet, till he finally fell over backward. Then it be-

came known that Carrasco was bloodier than I, and the crowd went to help him. As for me, two peasants took me by the hands and led me along. They were visibly delighted to have been the ones who had captured me.

‘Was the beggar trying to kidnap you?’

‘No. The poor fellow is incapable of harming anyone.’

But fantastic rumours were circulating, and I had to shout out again and again that I had gone of my own free will, to keep them from lynching him.

My father received me, passing up and down the court like a wild beast.

‘This is all over, all over,’ he repeated.

When we arrived, he began to listen to the twenty-seven versions of each of my attendants. As I saw that no one was paying much attention to me, I went over to the bulldog and sat down on his ribs. He was uneasy with so many people about, and I could feel his growls through my body. But despite his uneasiness he sniffed at my blood as he had the time before and lovingly licked my hands and knees. I must have presented a lamentable appearance, though none of my wounds were at all serious. My appearance, however, was nothing in comparison with Carrasco’s, who limped, had one ear torn, and had to walk with his hands in the air to stop his nose bleeding.

When everyone had become calm, my father sent for me. He repeated:

‘This is the end.’

What was the end?

I finally understood. He had decided to send me to boarding school. My mother said that I would have to have more underclothes made, but my father insisted:

‘To-morrow morning!’

I told about the beggar, but said nothing of Carrasco. It was the matter of the beggar, however, which had made them angry. I went to wash and caught a glimpse of my face, which was really impressive. After I washed, there was

almost nothing to be seen. A few scratches here and there. Mosén Joaquín had arrived; by the time the rumours had reached him they were sufficiently alarming. When he saw that the matter was unimportant and that the story as I told it was simple and edifying, he took my side and began to defend me. My father seemed to be listening, but when my champion ended, he sighed and said:

‘I am worn out, Mosén Joaquín. I have reached my limit. He goes to boarding school to-morrow.’

I did not leave on the following day. Various preparations had to be made for the journey, and in the afternoon I went to call on Mosén Joaquín. He offered me fruit and some of the sweetmeats that the nuns made. He looked at me in his usual manner, half-way between surprise and amusement. I asked him why heroes were killed.

‘I’ll answer you if you will tell me how the idea occurred to you.’

I explained as well as I could what had happened to me in the castle, and Mosén Joaquín said:

‘These things are too deep for you to understand. But you once asked me what the word “immolation” meant. That is it. There is the answer. You are impressed by that parchment we read. The end not only of heroes but of poets and of saints is thus, almost always.’

I asked for further explanations. So far, I had not understood a word.

‘I will not tell you any more, my son. Remember that word “immolation”.’

‘I do remember it.’

‘Answer your doubts with it, and one day when you are older you will understand it yourself.’

This only increased the mystery. Mosén Joaquín added jovially:

‘When you understand it, if I am still alive, write to me from wherever you may be.’

I promised him I would, and left him very late in the after-

noon repeating, 'Immolation'. The word reminded me of nothing but Valentina receiving the blood of a wounded pigeon.

The preparations for my journey continued. We were not going to the Jesuits at Zaragoza, but farther away, to Reus, where my father said there was a 'much more efficient' school. My father was unsympathetic to the Jesuits. He said that in spite of their reputation he had never met a really intelligent one in his life. The monks of the Holy Family offered them keen competition. Their professors, better prepared — he mentioned several well-known scholars — their more comfortable buildings, their more brilliant social position, in which, unlike the Jesuits, they aroused no jealousies. When everything was ready, I asked if they had heard any news of the beggar. No one knew anything about him. I said that I would not go to school until I knew that the beggar was being cared for, and two days later they told me that they had put him in an asylum. When I had seen proofs of it, I consented to set out.

Before I left, I wrote Valentina a letter. I sent her new stanzas of the 'Universiad' and told her that I would go on with it at school, where I was going to be locked up. I had so often been threatened with a terrifying house of correction that I was almost delighted to know that I was to go to a good school. And, remembering the incident of the blind man, I nodded my head and said: 'Saints are the thing that is really lacking in the world.'

I had not received a single answer from Valentina. Perhaps my father intercepted them, because I could not understand how she could be so forgetful of me.

It was cold. My father, having received a telegram from the director of the school, Father Miro, whom he knew, said that we would set off at once. The farther we went, the milder my father became. When we reached the station he bought two second-class tickets.

The journey increased my father's mildness, although he

was on the point of relapsing at several of my questions. Thinking of the letter I had sent to Valentina, I asked him:

‘Do saints marry?’

As there were other people in the compartment, my father mastered his nerves and answered me. Saints never married.

‘Then is it a sin to marry?’

My father said no and that marriage was a high and noble way of serving God. He added that many married people had been saints.

‘Then saints do marry?’ I insisted, wanting to know as definitely as possible.

My father turned the knob of the radiator as far as it would go and asked the ladies’ permission to open the windows. His ideal in hygiene was a very hot radiator and open windows. The other travellers did not have the heart to refuse him. Afterwards my father answered me in more detail, saying that, as a saint, as a being in a state of beatitude, no one married, but that certain married people had been saints. ‘And now,’ he added, ‘all married people are martyrs.’ The sentence was applauded by smiles which opened the way to acquaintanceships and conversation. In the midst of which I was forgotten: so I spent my time looking out the window until we reached Reus.

We went to an hotel on a small square that had been lately watered; the asphalt reflected street lamps, cyclists, and varnished carriages, which passed silently on their rubber tyres with no sound but the measured clopping of hoofs. In the centre of the square, which was surrounded by stone buildings, there was an enormous equestrian statue of General Prim, an intriguer in the palaces and courts of Europe, who was born in Reus. I was enchanted with the square and the hotel, and would gladly have stayed there, but my father made a telephone call and announced with satisfaction:

‘They are expecting you, so we will go at once.’

We took a carriage, and a little while later I was surrounded

by monks in the reception room of the College of Saint Peter Apostle, an enormous building on the Avenida de la Estación, three sides of which gave on as many walks lined with carobs and strawberry trees. The fourth gave on a narrow street, on the opposite side of which was an electric power station with two tall chimneys. I observed all this while I was getting out of the carriage.

The monks showered me with attentions. My father conferred with Father Miro privately, and told me that he himself would see to buying the regulation table service for me and having it engraved. They told him the number to have marked on it. My father, much pleased to know that he was going to be rid of me, made the acquaintance of all the monks . . . Behind me I heard, 'Professor of Higher Algebra', 'Professor of Latin Grammar', 'Professor of Language and Literature'. Then long compliments were exchanged. The Father Prior, seeing me looking toward a court from which shouts and cries were proceeding, said:

'Look out there, if you like. There are bicycles and skates and a football.'

My father permitted himself to remark that it was not precisely these things of which I stood in need. I began definitely to hate him. There was a monk walking up and down the hall which led to the vestibule, shivering under his short cape; we had not been introduced to him. My father noticed him, and the prior said that he was a hero of the Japanese missions. I have since observed that in almost every monastery there is an unsociable, neurotic, perhaps half-mad brother whose peculiarities are charitably explained away by references to his sufferings in oriental missions. The 'martyr of Japan' here was really unpleasant.

When, after my father had left, I went into the court, three boys about two years younger than I looked at me in great admiration and said:

'He didn't cry!'

I was well received, though I noticed that the boys came

up to me and wanted to stay with me out of curiosity. There were Romanesque arches everywhere, like those in the castle, only they were made not of stone but of concrete, and where they ended the red brick wall began, to be pierced above by another arcade. The whole building, therefore, was red and grey. I was keenly observed, but I observed my surroundings no less keenly.

Supper was good, but we had to pray first and say grace afterward. In the immense dining-room there was a little pulpit of carved wood, from which one of the pupils read aloud while we ate. 'I like it,' said my neighbour, 'when it's my turn to read, because then I eat by myself afterward and they give me jam and preserves and anything I want.'

The monastery was immense. The stairways were like those in the castle. The echo of footfalls was lost in the immense arcades. My father was out of sight, and I was free and alone in wide, sonorous spaces. When I went to my room — we all went together in two files — we said our prayers standing in line in the gallery, and then each retired to his cell. Mine had a very large window on the side of the building that faced the centre of the city. The blinds were closed, and when I opened them, because there was no light in the room except what came in from the hall, I retreated in amazement. In the darkness the city seemed to be raising hundreds of arms of light into the sky. Gilded reflectors fantastically illuminated the weather vanes and crosses of the highest buildings, and all the spires of the city's towers and domes were strung with thousands of yellow electric lights, which climbed up the sky to culminate in crosses on which there were letters reading: *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES*.

Alone in my cell, far from my family, with this marvellous sky to which nothing I had ever seen could be compared, unless it was the sunsets at the castle and the miniature landscapes on my study tablecloth, it all seemed to me to be truly a miracle.

I went to the lavatory. Boys were running down the

corridor hitting each other and trying to escape the vigilance of a solitary monk who was standing guard where three corridors met.

I asked why the city was illuminated.

'Haven't you heard?'

Others came to tell me. They were very nice to me that first day. The entire city was decked out to celebrate the sixteenth centenary of Constantine the Great.

I returned to my cell and lay down, leaving the blinds open. The horizon vanished in a mist of marvels, and directly opposite my window, high up and alone, a cross awakened old feelings.

'Truly,' I said to myself, '*in hoc signo vinces*'.

I remembered my adventures in the castle. I was a hero, and heroes were killed. I was a poet, and poets were killed. Saints too were sacrificed. Perhaps Constantine the Great had been killed in a dark vault.

Would I be killed? I stroked the sheet, whose surface was cool and smooth, and, gazing once more at the night rising in bursts of light toward a sky which looked new and unused, I said, feeling a great firmness in my heart: 'If I am killed, what of it? Now I understand immolation. I shall write and tell Mosén Joaquín.' But it was a lie. I understood nothing.

That came much later.

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